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## **British Encounters with Blues and Jazz in Transatlantic Circulation, c.1929-1960**

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**British Encounters with Blues and Jazz in  
Transatlantic Circulation, c.1929-1960**

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King's College London

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## **Abstract**

While existing scholarly and popular histories locate British blues interest in the cultural, social, and political shifts of the 1960s, this thesis investigates an earlier period of blues appreciation and performance that straddles the Second World War, from c.1929 to 1960. In contrast to existing scholarship that understands the blues as a standalone genre, I argue that British blues engagement during this period is inextricable from contemporaneous jazz interest. Most importantly, my research challenges assumptions around the blues and jazz's international reception: I argue that these musics were defined by their transatlantic circulation as much as their origins, and evoked ideals of mobility and interracial affinity as well notions of African American social and cultural specificity.

My thesis examines four key 'moments' within the period c.1929-1960; each engages critically with issues of encounter, reception, and performance. In chapter 1, I trace the dissemination and reception of blues and jazz on British record labels during the 1930s. Emerging 'hot' criticism and labels' promotional strategies increasingly emphasised African Americans' creative proficiency, but also established a complex relationship with earlier primitivist tropes and Eurocentric ideals of 'art music'. I consider how enthusiasts' participation in locally organised 'Rhythm Clubs' challenge existing interpretations of recording-based encounters with African American music, with particular reference to the concept of mediation as well as notions of geographical and cultural 'distance'.

In chapter 2, I explore the career of Britain's first 'New Orleans style' jazz band, George Webb's Dixielanders. I trace the emergence of the New Orleans 'revival' movement in Britain through the circulation of American texts and sounds,

highlighting key discrepancies in revivalism's transatlantic spread. I argue for a revised understanding of British jazz revivalism, one that accounts for its development as a response to the impact of the Second World War on British jazz culture.

In chapter 3, I compare the British reception of Josh White and Big Bill Broonzy, two of the first African American blues musicians to visit Britain. Eschewing the assumption that attitudes to White and Broonzy were formed solely during their debut tours, I show how these musicians' reception hinged on earlier and more complex understandings of 'folk blues' formed at the intersection of American folklore scholarship, 'hot' jazz collecting, wartime propaganda, and postwar cultural diplomacy. I trace how White and Broonzy were each required to navigate this complex terrain in their British performances.

In chapter 4, I examine the relationship between the British Chris Barber Jazz Band and the African American blues musician Muddy Waters during these performers' transatlantic tours. While existing scholarship has concentrated on the British reception of Waters's distinctive style of urban blues, I position these musicians' encounters within an emerging system of transatlantic exchange. I suggest that this 'economy of exchange' indicates a shift in understandings of musical authenticity, complicating revivalist ideals of black music as a culture under threat and suggesting new modes of encounter based on ideals of reciprocity and collaboration.

Ultimately, my research calls for greater attention to the importance of international circulation in understandings of blues and jazz's meaning and value, as well as the complexity of reactions to these musics outside of their contexts of origin.

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## Introduction

On the afternoon of 9 January 1955, the twenty-two year old Northern Irish blues singer Otilie Patterson took to the stage at London's Royal Festival Hall, as part of the National Jazz Federation's *Jazz Scene 1955* concert. It was her first professional gig; only a few months earlier she had been an amateur singer and pianist working as a secondary school art teacher in Ballymena, Co. Antrim. Patterson had moved to London during the summer holiday – 'looking for fame and fortune' as she would later recall – and immersed herself in the capital's jazz scene. She would often sit in with a newly formed 'New Orleans-style' band led by trombonist Chris Barber. On 28 December 1954, she received an abrupt telegram from Barber, inviting her to perform at *Jazz Scene 1955*, and to join the band full time.<sup>1</sup> Standing onstage in front of the Festival Hall's 3,500-strong capacity audience, as her accompanists played the opening chord of 'St. Louis Blues' (Sound Ex. i), Patterson closed her eyes and began to sing. During Barber's spoken introduction the audience had been muted and polite, their applause encouraging but with little expectation. After Patterson's rendition of 'St. Louis Blues', however, the audience was ecstatic. Shouts, whoops and whistles of excitement filled the hall.<sup>2</sup>

Patterson's renown as a blues singer spread quickly; for the *Evening Standard*, her twenty-minute appearance was enough to proclaim the young vocalist 'the greatest blues singer to emerge on this side of the Atlantic', while her debut

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Pointon, 'Spotlight on Otilie Patterson (Part 2)', *Just Jazz*, 200 (2008), 3-7, pp. 4-6.

<sup>2</sup> This account is formed from press cuttings that Patterson kept in her personal scrapbooks, and from recordings of her Royal Festival Hall debut. See Notebook 1951-1952 [incl. 1955 press cuttings], National Jazz Archive, Otilie Patterson Collection, Box 1, Item 2; Chris Barber's Jazz Band with Otilie Patterson, *Chris Barber at the Royal Festival Hall* (Decca DFE 6252, 1955); Otilie Patterson with Chris Barber's Jazz Band, *Blues* (Decca DFE 6303, 1955); and Various Artists, *Traditional Jazz Scene 1955* (Decca LK4100, 1955).

recordings released the same year were lauded for their ability to get ‘to the heart of the blues idiom’.<sup>3</sup> Between 1955 and 1960, Patterson became one of Britain’s most acclaimed jazz singers, ranking alongside pop vocalists like Lita Roza, Cleo Laine, and Shirley Bassey in *Melody Maker*’s annual readers’ polls.<sup>4</sup> As a member of Chris Barber’s Jazz Band, Patterson toured Europe and the United States, and also accompanied many of the first African American blues performers to visit Britain.

Patterson’s career provides a surprising context for the blues, a performance tradition with quite different cultural, social, and geographical associations.<sup>5</sup> The blues originated in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, flourishing in a variety of regional contexts in the rural south and subsequently in urban areas like Chicago, St. Louis, and Kansas City. The genre is most firmly associated with African American performance traditions: it has its roots in spirituals, field hollers, and work songs, and first emerged as an identifiable musical form amongst the repertoires of travelling shows, string bands, vaudeville, and ‘tin pan alley’ sheet music publishing. The music’s origins in these traditions, as well as its continued relevance to jazz and other forms of black popular music such as doo-wop, funk, and soul, reveals its longstanding resonance with African Americans’

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<sup>3</sup> Matt White, ‘School teacher hailed by jazz audience’, *Evening Standard*, [9 January 1955], from Notebook 1951-1952, NJA, Otilie Patterson Collection; Gerald Lascelles, [Review of Otilie Patterson with Chris Barber’s Jazz Band, *Blues* (Decca DFE 6303)], *Jazz Journal*, 8.8 (August 1955), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Patterson placed 11th in a 1955 *Melody Maker* poll, where Lita Roza placed 1st and Cleo Laine placed 2nd. By 1959, Patterson placed 2nd behind Laine, with Shirley Bassey placing 4th and Lita Roza placing 5th. See ‘How MM Readers Voted in the British Section of the ’55 Poll’, *Melody Maker*, 5 March 1955, p. 5; ‘Britain’s Best’, *Melody Maker*, 3 January 1959, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> The blues also has a formal definition: a three-phrase, twelve-bar chord sequence that employs the chords I, IV, and V. The focus of this thesis, however, is the history of blues performance traditions and their socially constructed meanings and reception. ‘The blues’ in this sense includes – but is not limited to – music structured according to the above formal parameters.

diverse social, cultural, and political experiences, in particular those resulting from their systemic marginalisation within American society as a whole.<sup>6</sup>

Patterson's career as a postwar British blues singer therefore forms part of a parallel history, that of the circulation, reception, and performance of African American music outside of the contexts and communities in which it originated. Her story raises important questions regarding the transatlantic dissemination of blues music and the politics of encounter and performance. In what form(s) did blues music arrive in Britain, and how did it enter British musical life? What was its appeal for British listeners and performers, and how did audiences understand performances by musicians like Patterson in relation to those of the African Americans they heard on record and, eventually, in person?

Despite her contemporary appeal, Patterson's story is largely absent from popular histories of British blues interest. Conventional narratives focus on the 1960s, when groups like the Rolling Stones, the Animals, and the Yardbirds became enamored with the rich musical world of postwar urban or 'Chicago' blues, contemporary rhythm and blues, and these styles' 'folk' antecedents such as the 'Delta' blues style from northwestern Mississippi.<sup>7</sup> This period was also marked by

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<sup>6</sup> For surveys of the blues's historical development, Paul Oliver, *The Story of the Blues: The Making of a Black Music*, 2nd edn (London: Pimlico, 1997); Elijah Wald, *The Blues: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). The blues's relationship to the African American experience has been the subject of much research, from multiple disciplines. See, for example, Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: The Meaning of the Blues* (London: Cassell, 1960); LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka], *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow, 1963); Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976); and William Barlow, *Looking Up at Down: The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Examples of popular histories that focus on the blues's adoption by fledgling British rock groups include John Milward, *Crossroads: How the Blues Shaped Rock 'n' Roll (and Rock Saved the Blues)* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2013), as well as the documentary films *Red, White, and Blues*, dir. by Mike Figgis,

an intense interest in the blues's origins and development, with the formation of magazines like *Blues Unlimited*, the reissue of early blues recordings on LP, and expeditions to seek out retired and 'undiscovered' blues musicians. The introduction of touring revues such as the American Folk Blues Festival and the Blues & Gospel Caravan, too, brought a large number of African American performers to Britain.<sup>8</sup> The richness of what has since become known as the 1960s 'blues revival', as well as the influence of British blues groups on post-1960s rock and pop music, has meant that earlier blues interest has been downplayed or ignored. In his book *Blues: The British Connection*, Bob Brunning (himself a member of the 1960s British blues-rock group Fleetwood Mac) begins his survey with the formation of the Rolling Stones, dispensing with the activities of two predecessors active in the 1950s – guitarist Alexis Korner and trombonist Chris Barber – in a cursory, three-paragraph sketch. He does not mention Otilie Patterson. Discographer Les Fancourt's *British Blues on Record 1957-1970* takes a similar approach, confining his pre-1960s coverage to a smattering of recordings by Korner and his contemporary the harmonica player Cyril Davies, both of whom would become central to the 1960s British blues scene. The many 1950s recordings made by Barber and Patterson as well as other renowned blues singers such as Beryl Bryden and George Melly are omitted. Even academic histories of British blues interest give the pre-1960s period short shrift. Roberta Schwartz's otherwise comprehensive *How*

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(Reverse Angle International, 2003), and *Blues Britannia*, dir. by Chris Rodley (BBC, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> For a summary of the British and continental blues revival focusing on the 1960s onwards, see Paul Vernon, 'Blue Europe', *fRoots*, 294 (December 2007), <<https://ourblues.wordpress.com/2011/10/02/blue-europe-part-i-and-ii/>> [accessed 22 December 2017].

*Britain Got the Blues* covers the period 1873-1970, yet over half of the study explores the final seven years of this chronology.<sup>9</sup>

Historians' apparent lack of interest in pre-1960s British blues appreciation is, I argue, primarily due to prevailing understandings of the blues as a standalone genre.<sup>10</sup> While the blues is regarded as a building block of African American music, a collection of musical tropes or a general sensibility that suffuses jazz and a host of other black popular forms, it is also understood as a musical genre of its own with a unique developmental history and canon of artists and repertoire.<sup>11</sup> This distinction is subtle, yet pervasive: Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Miles Davis might 'play the blues', but they are not heard as 'blues musicians' in the same way that John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters, or Howlin' Wolf are. Furthermore, although historians of African American history and culture have often examined 'the blues' in its multiple and varied idiomatic contexts, the more close-knit field of 'blues scholarship', which is populated predominantly by semi-professional researchers, critics, and discographers, overwhelmingly limits its purview to 'the blues' as a discrete genre.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Bob Brunning, *Blues: The British Connection* (Poole: Blandford Press, 1986); Les Fancourt, *British Blues on Record: 1957-1970* (Faversham: Retrack Books, 1992); Roberta Freund Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues: The Transmission and Reception of American Blues Style in the United Kingdom* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Both Susan McClary and Elijah Wald have argued that it is specifically the success of British blues-influenced pop and rock groups of the 1960s that have helped promote an image of the blues as a standalone genre. See Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: Amistad, 2005), pp. 7, 221; Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> For accounts of the blues's pervasiveness in African American expressive culture, see Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976); Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, p. 325-348; Guthrie P. Ramsey, *Race Music: Black Music from Bebop to Hip Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 44-75.

<sup>12</sup> This split is noticeable in a comparison of two books on 'the blues': Albert Murray's *Stomping the Blues* and Paul Oliver's *The Story of the Blues: The Making of a Black Music*, 2nd edn (London: Pimlico, 1997). Murray, an African American author, critic, and cultural historian, surveys the continued relevance of the blues to

So far, British blues performance and appreciation has only attracted the attention of scholars who see these encounters as a chapter in the development of postwar urban blues and its influence on rock and pop music. As a consequence, even writings that *do* focus on pre-1960s blues engagement often approach the subject in a way that normalises the parameters of later blues interest rather than remaining open to how these parameters might have changed over time. In his survey of European blues appreciation, record collector and blues historian Paul Vernon, for instance, states emphatically that

before 1940 the real blues had made almost no impact on Europe [...] the few discs issued were often viewed out of context by the jazz collectors they were aimed at.

Vernon goes on to pinpoint the first known recordings of the blues's key prewar and postwar developmental styles issued on British labels, and traces the increasing frequency of canonic blues musicians' visits to the UK.<sup>13</sup>

Yet while Vernon sees a discrepancy between the existence of 'real blues' and its dissemination as a form of jazz, this overlap was central to British understandings of the blues between 1929 and 1960. This relationship is perhaps best encapsulated in the journalist and jazz critic Iain Lang's seminal 1942 essay 'Background of the Blues'. Lang writes

the blues is not the whole of jazz, but the whole of the blues is jazz; it is the one form which has no existence apart from this idiom.<sup>14</sup>

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jazz and swing throughout the first half of the twentieth century, yet barely mentions influential blues guitarists like Robert Johnson or Muddy Waters. In contrast Paul Oliver, a white British blues scholar, provides a comprehensive history of the blues from the end of the Civil War to the emergence of soul music in the 1960s, but does not mention influential jazz musicians like Louis Armstrong or Duke Ellington.

<sup>13</sup> Vernon, 'Blue Europe'.

Although the blues had identifiable stylistic and thematic characteristics, it was nevertheless a fundamental part of a broader jazz tradition. Blues performance occurred in the context of jazz, as Otilie Patterson's debut indicates, while blues's history was discussed in the pages of periodicals, books, and pamphlets that were otherwise devoted to jazz. Over the course of the 1950s, specialist interest in the blues would grow in the British musical press, in particular in the writings of Max Jones, Derrick Stewart-Baxter, and Paul Oliver, but the broader identification of blues and jazz as parallel yet separate traditions would not become widely accepted until the 1960s.

Given that British performers and listeners in the period c.1929-1960 heard the blues in the context of jazz, the musicians, repertoire, and performance characteristics that early enthusiasts identified as 'blues' were different to those lionised by blues audiences in later decades. As Patterson's debut indicates, British blues interest centered to a great extent on professional female vocalists of the 1920s and 30s, rather than the itinerant male guitarists that would entice 1960s 'blues revival' audiences. As early as 1936, record collector and budding critic Edwin Hinchcliffe was able to boast of owning ten records by the vocalist Bessie Smith.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Iain Lang, 'Background of the Blues', in *The Saturday Book, 1941-42: A New Miscellany*, ed. by Leonard Russell (London: Hutchinson, 1942), pp. 330-357 (p. 346). That Lang's thesis was an accepted formulation for the relationship between blues and jazz during the period I am investigating is demonstrated by the fact that Lang was able to reprint and expand his writing on the blues on several occasions during the 1940s and 1950s. See Lang, *Background of the Blues* (London: Workers' Music Association, 1947); *Jazz in Perspective: The Background of the Blues* (London: Hutchinson, 1947, revd. 1957). Vernon acknowledges Lang's premise but ultimately rejects it as incorrect, highlighting instead the work of Paul Oliver who 'knew that this [Lang's statement] was not the case'. See Vernon, 'Blue Europe'.

<sup>15</sup> R. Edwin S. Hinchcliffe, 'Blues', *Swing Music*, 14 (Autumn 1936), 9-10, 84, p. 10. This quantity, Hinchcliffe lamented, was 'very limited' compared to the number of sides Smith had actually recorded by this point in her career. With hindsight, however, it is a notably large number given that only four of Smith's recordings had been released in Britain by 1936.

For Hinchcliffe, these records demonstrated the blues's unique directness and simplicity:

It is the natural foundation of the blues upon the human emotions which makes them so significant, so appealing, and above all so sincere, and it is in this that their greatness lies.<sup>16</sup>

Hinchcliffe's understanding of the blues was conditioned by a belief in African Americans' supposedly innate musicality; he observed how the genre had emerged amongst the 'illiterate Negroes of the Southern States [...] born of the Negro's age old capacity for turning his sorrows and his joys into song.' Yet while we rightly see Hinchcliffe's language as problematic today, his ideas when considered in their historical context mark an important development in attitudes towards African American music. The fundamental simplicity and emotional sincerity that Hinchcliffe identified in the blues was key to new ideas about the artistic value of jazz as a whole, and particularly the value of its African American exponents. Jazz's basis in the blues, Hinchcliffe observed,

has recaptured that humanity in music which the majority of modern musicians seem to have lost the ability or the desire to express.

If Bessie Smith was known as the 'Empress of the Blues', then jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong was surely its 'Emperor'; Armstrong's blues playing positioned him as 'an artist of the highest order' with 'truly phenomenal technique [that gives] the fullest expressions [sic] to his emotions.'<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Hinchcliffe, 'Blues', p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Hinchcliffe, 'Blues', p. 10-11. Hinchcliffe also heaped praise on composer and band leader Duke Ellington, declaring him 'the greatest arranging mind in modern Negro music' and asserting that his use of the blues in his compositions as 'among the most significant achievements in jazz.' See Hinchcliffe, 'Blues', pp. 84-85.



While Hinchcliffe conceptualised the blues as ‘the most racially pure form of Negro music’, understandings of blues and jazz in the 1940s were increasingly influenced by an awareness of these musics’ relationship to the African American experience. The New Orleans ‘revival’ movement that began amongst jazz record collectors in the United States during the late 1930s would encourage British enthusiasts’ interest in jazz’s origins and development, leading to somewhat circular understandings of the links between blues and jazz that can be seen in Lang’s quote above. While the blues was increasingly understood as a type of ‘folk’ music that underpinned jazz, the revivalist notion that *all* ‘authentic’ jazz had its basis in the social and cultural attributes of African American life also retained the coexistence of earlier taxonomies of the jazz tradition. Female vocal blues stood alongside other ‘schools’ of jazz performance including boogie-woogie piano, the ‘New Orleans style’, ‘Dixieland’, and ‘Chicago style’ jazz.

It was not until after the Second World War that jazz enthusiasts would begin to interpret the blues as a parallel performance tradition to jazz. Informed by American scholarship on ‘Negro folksong’, collectors and critics began to investigate the lives and careers of early ‘race’ recording artists, in particular itinerant male guitarists who had been active in the southern States before the War. Examples of what is now referred to as ‘country blues’, such as the recordings of guitarists Blind Lemon Jefferson or Huddie Ledbetter (aka Lead Belly) were conceived as relics of a lost musical past.<sup>18</sup> By the early 1950s, the foundation of several independent jazz record labels, as well as major labels’ growing awareness of

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<sup>18</sup> Although the term ‘country blues’ is often associated with a 1959 book of the same name by American blues researcher Samuel Charters, it in fact appears earlier in the writings of the British blues critic and discographer Derrick Stewart-Baxter. See Samuel Charters, *The Country Blues* (New York: Rinehart, 1959, revd. New York: Da Capo Press, 1975); and Derrick Stewart-Baxter, ‘Blues in the Country’, *Jazz Journal*, 12.4 (April 1959), 3-4.

jazz enthusiasts' specialist tastes, had broadened the range of available blues on record. Labels like Tempo and Jazz Collector issued discs by prewar 'race record' guitarists like Lead Belly, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Papa Charlie Jackson, while labels like Melodisc, Vogue, and the London label (a subsidiary of Decca) secured the rights to releasing more recent recordings of 'folk blues' exponents like guitarist Josh White and, more importantly, the growing field of contemporary 'urban' blues and rhythm and blues.<sup>19</sup> Early visits by musicians like Josh White and the guitarist Big Bill Broonzy – both of whom had rarely collaborated with jazz musicians on record – provided further aural evidence of a parallel blues tradition developing independently of standard jazz history narratives. Notably absent throughout this period, however, were recordings of 'Mississippi Delta' blues musicians now regarded as key figures in the genre's development, such as Robert Johnson, Son House, and Charley Patton. These appear to have been not only unavailable but also largely unknown to British collectors and enthusiasts before the 1960s.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the growing audibility of the blues as a parallel and distinct performance tradition from jazz, the relative rarity of these recordings – and perhaps too the continuing popularity of jazz as a whole – meant that there was little

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<sup>19</sup> Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, pp. 29-32. Schwartz also notes that the London label was also responsible for the British distribution of American reissue efforts on LP, such as the Riverside label's 'Origins of Jazz' series.

<sup>20</sup> There were exceptions, of course. The discographer and critic Derrick Stewart-Baxter wrote a column on Charley Patton's recordings for *Jazz Journal* in August 1949, while trombonist Chris Barber has since recalled acquiring a copy of a Robert Johnson recording as early as 1947. See Derrick Stewart-Baxter, 'Discography of Paramount Issues', *Jazz Journal*, 2.8 (August 1949), 5; Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, p. 64. These are isolated cases, however, and do not seem to have had any measurable impact on understandings of the blues or local performance cultures, aside from supporting those that were already in evidence due to other, more widely available records. Paul Oliver, for instance, claims not to have heard anything by Robert Johnson until the 1950s, well after beginning his blues record collecting. See Oliver, Oliver, Paul, 'Overseas Blues: Europeans and the Blues', in *Sounds of the South*, ed. by Daniel W. Patterson (Chapel Hill: The Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1991), pp. 57-72 (p. 57).

alteration to domestic blues and jazz performance between 1945 and 1960. British blues performers invariably came in two types: vocalists like George Melly, Neva Raphaello, Beryl Bryden, and Otilie Patterson performed the repertoire of ‘classic’ female blues singers accompanied by British traditional jazz ensembles, while pianists like Tony Short, Cyril Scutt, and Johnny Parker were styled as ‘blues’ and ‘boogie-woogie’ piano players, modelling their performances on the recordings of American names like Jimmy Yancey, Meade Lux Lewis, and James P. Johnson.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the only significant departure from these categories can be found in the activities of a small group of jazz musicians: trumpeter Ken Colyer, vocalist and washboard-player Bill Colyer (brother of Ken), the guitarist Alexis Korner, and banjoist Tony (aka ‘Lonnie’) Donegan. As early members of the New Orleans-inspired Crane River Jazz Band, these musicians would frequently perform informal ‘skiffle’ sets within their jazz gigs in the mid-1950s. Drawing their repertoire primarily from the recordings of Lead Belly, but also early ‘race record’ blues artists like Big Maceo, Bumble Bee Slim, and Sleepy John Estes, these performers represent an early outlet for dedicated blues interest that was conceptually distinguished from predominant jazz performance culture.<sup>22</sup>

### *The racial politics of British blues interest*

Acknowledging the much longer history of the blues’s international circulation as part of the jazz tradition means that we must consider how the music’s meanings and definitions have been shaped by their mobility. Fortunately, there has been a recent growth in blues scholarship that critically examines the ways in which white

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<sup>21</sup> Lawrence Davies, ‘British Blues’, in *Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World*, ed. by David Horn and John Shepherd, 14 vols (London: Bloomsbury, 2003-2017), XI (2017), pp. 84-88.

<sup>22</sup> Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, pp. 63-65.

audiences, critics, scholars, promoters, and performers on both sides of the Atlantic have (re)shaped ideas about the blues's origins, development, meaning, and value. The 'discovery' of the blues by white audiences means that the blues has often been understood in terms sympathetic to these audiences, rather than representative of the historical record or the music's original listeners and performers. Jeff Todd Titon, reflecting on the 1960s blues revival in the United States, observes that he and his contemporaries' 'discovery' of the blues might better be thought of as 'acts of "constituting" or "invention"', and that enthusiasts' 'interpretative acts' of documenting, criticism, analysis, and performance 'constructed the very thing we thought we had found'.<sup>23</sup> Instead of hearing the blues as a form of black pop music, white audiences constructed an antithetical image: an authentic 'folk art' that consciously rejected the commercial success or cosmopolitan influences of early twentieth-century popular entertainment.<sup>24</sup> Enthusiasts constructed an archetypal 'bluesman': an itinerant loner who eschewed the comforts of a professional career for a life on the road, giving voice to his experiences through song.

Scholars' critique of this historical revisionism is three-fold. First, white audiences reshaping of the blues's history and meanings constitutes a process of 'invention'. For Wald, white enthusiasts' portrayals of 'bluesmen', and the genre more broadly as 'folk' music, imposes a monolithic narrative that determines what does or does not count as 'blues history', obscuring the complexity of the music's position within African American culture and society. Second, romanticised histories of the blues display a deep-rooted fascination with racial difference. Marybeth

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<sup>23</sup> See Titon, 'Reconstructing the Blues: Reflections on the 1960s Blues Revival', in *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined*, ed. by Neil V. Rosenberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), pp. 220-240 (pp. 222-223).

<sup>24</sup> Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: Amistad, 2005), p. xiii.

Hamilton argues that white enthusiasts were wedded to an ideal of ‘an undiluted and primal black music’, which cast ‘authentic’ blues as anguished, violent, and hypersexualised, without acknowledging wider cultural or social themes.<sup>25</sup> Third, white audiences’ ideas about the blues served ultimately to affirm these audiences’ own concerns, desires, and anxieties. Wald, for instance, explores how later rock musicians drew on connotations of aggressive non-conformity to legitimise their own performance style and behaviour.<sup>26</sup> Hamilton likewise observes how white audiences listened to the blues to attain ‘an unimagined transcendence, a level of emotional intensity otherwise out of their reach.’<sup>27</sup> Even more earnest blues enthusiasts have heard what Jeff Todd Titon terms ‘a stylized revolt against bourgeois values’, an outlet for their own disillusionment with a stultifying postwar society.<sup>28</sup> White listeners’ enthusiasm for the blues, then, was also an exercise in self-expression that appropriated African Americans’ marginalised status as a ‘life choice’, yet without the concomitant risks that African Americans themselves faced on a day-to-day basis.<sup>29</sup>

Scholars’ critiques of the ‘invention’ of the blues by its white devotees rely heavily on a notion of cultural *distance*. As Wald reflects:

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<sup>25</sup> Marybeth Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues: Black Voices, White Visions* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007), p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> Wald *Escaping the Delta*, p. 221. Susan McClary makes a similar point: ‘Although the enterprise of British rock was certainly not untouched by the desire for commercial success, an ideology of noncommercial authenticity that first led Clapton and others to champion the blues permeated their self-images as rebels against capitalism. It continues to inform many of the rock critics who emerged at that same time as historians, theorists, and arbiters of popular taste who justified this particular enterprise.’ See McClary, *Conventional Wisdom*, p. 60.

<sup>27</sup> Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, p. 18.

<sup>28</sup> Titon, ‘Reconstructing the blues’, 223-225.

<sup>29</sup> Christian O’Connell, ‘The Color of the Blues: Considering Revisionist Blues Scholarship’, *Southern Cultures*, 19.1 (Spring 2013), 61-81, pp. 67-68. George McKay has likewise observed how exoticisation acts to ‘contain’ blackness. See McKay, *Circular Breathing: The Cultural Politics of Jazz in Britain* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 113.

virtually all the historical, musicological, or even impressionistic writing on blues has been done by people from backgrounds much more like mine than like those of the blues artists themselves.<sup>30</sup>

Samuel Floyd Jr. likewise observes that the blues ‘spoke a musical code decipherable by knowers of culture but inaccessible to those outside it’.<sup>31</sup> For both Floyd and Wald, white blues enthusiasts are presented with an unavoidable barrier: they lack both the lived experience of African Americans’ marginalisation, and insider knowledge of African American culture, to understand the music’s ‘true’ meanings. The notion of distance has also been employed to describe the manner of audiences’ encounters with the blues through recordings. Recordings, Hamilton argues, provide the illusion of direct contact with the musical past, yet leave ample room for (mis)interpretation.<sup>32</sup> Audiences and performers who are not themselves African American may neglect the cultural traditions and the social circumstances that gave rise to the blues in the segregated South. The cultural ‘distance’ between white listener and African American performer made the blues exciting, yet it is indicative of white audiences’ positions of privilege and power.<sup>33</sup>

In the context of British reception, the cultural distance involved in white enthusiasts’ encounters with the blues acquires two further dimensions, that of nation and geography. It is unsurprising that these elements would impact on British

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<sup>30</sup> Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, p. xxiii.

<sup>31</sup> Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 78, quoted in Christian O’Connell, *Blues, How Do You Do?*, p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, p. 8; also Christian O’Connell, ‘Dreaming Up the Blues: Transatlantic Blues Scholarship in the 1950s’, in *Transatlantic Roots Music: Folk, Blues, and National Identities*, ed. by Jill Terry and Neil A. Wynn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 37-56 (pp. 47-49).

<sup>33</sup> O’Connell, *Blues, How Do You Do?: Paul Oliver and the Transatlantic Story of the Blues* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), pp. 10-11. See also Baraka, *Blues People*, p. 12.

enthusiasts' understanding. In addition to a lack of recordings, the inaccessibility of live performance by African American musicians for much of the period under investigation was a significant factor. Longstanding disagreements between the British Musicians' Union and the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) meant that in the period c.1935-1956, American performers wanting to tour Britain did so only under heavy restrictions.<sup>34</sup>

Yet while the conditions of 'distance' described above are undeniably mediating factors within British interest in African American music, historians often rely on complacently nationalistic or exceptionalist approaches to British enthusiasts' interest. Writing about the blues musician Muddy Waters's first UK performances in 1958, when he was accompanied by Chris Barber's Jazz Band, Waters's biographer Robert Gordon speculates that

Muddy spent the first half of the evening subjected to Dixieland, and wondered if anyone in the entire country of funny-speaking people knew anything about the blues.<sup>35</sup>

Gordon's comments here illustrate important elements of received opinion. His assertion that Waters was 'subjected' to Barber's performance indicates that the association of the blues with jazz is both incorrect and forced. More importantly, though, Gordon postulates that Waters's concern stemmed from a fundamental incompatibility: these 'funny-speaking' British blues enthusiasts were too white and

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<sup>34</sup> More a more in depth survey of the 'MU ban', see Martin Cloonan and Matt Brennan, 'Alien Invasions: The British Musicians' Union and Foreign Musicians', *Popular Music*, 32.2 (2013), 277-295; Howard Rye, 'Visiting Firemen (No. 11, Garland Wilson)', *Storyville*, 119 (June-July 1985), 176-193, pp. 192-193; Rye, 'Fearsome Means of Discord: Early Encounters with Jazz', in *Black Music in Britain: Essays on the Afro-Asian Contribution to Popular Music*, ed. by Paul Oliver (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990), pp. 45-57 (pp. 55-56).

<sup>35</sup> Robert Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied: The Life and Times of Muddy Waters* (London: Pimlico, 2003), p. 159.

too *foreign* to understand the blues. Popular music scholar Andrew Kellett, likewise, describes the blues's appeal as a compensation for the cultural limits of postwar Britain, 'a grey, small, second-rate power, financially strapped and culturally exhausted.'<sup>36</sup> These sentiments inculcate the notion that the blues figured as an exotic 'other' to the strictures of British culture and society in a way that relies as much on a racialised binary of the potency of black expressive culture and the corresponding hollowness of 'grey' (read 'white') British culture as it does on an accurate assessment of postwar British musical life.

Underlying the above critiques is the idea that both blues and jazz are uniquely American phenomena.<sup>37</sup> During the 'Year of the Blues' celebrations in 2003, the United States Congress passed a resolution declaring the blues

the most influential form of American roots music, with its impact heard around the world in rock and roll, jazz, rhythm and blues, country and even classical music; [...] [it] is an important documentation of African-American culture in the twentieth century [...] [it documents] American history [...] and the migration of the United States from a rural, agricultural society to an urban, industrialized nation.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Andrew Kellett, 'Fathers and Sons: American Blues and British Rock Music, 1960-1970' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland, 2008), p. 18; Jon Milward has argued, too, that 'it's little wonder that the African American blues would leave a different impression on white kids in America and Great Britain [...] British kids grew up in the haunted, economically challenged shadow of World War II'. See Milward, *Crossroads*, p. 33. See also O'Connell, *Blues, How Do You Do?*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>37</sup> This interpretation of jazz is commonly identified with the work of James Lincoln Collier. See Collier, *Jazz: The American Theme Song* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> United States Congress, Senate, 'Designating the year beginning February 1, 2003, as the "Year of the Blues"', S. Res. 316, 107th Cong., 2d sess., (5 September 2002), S1.



Although the impact of the 2003 ‘Year of the Blues’ is outside the scope of this thesis, the resolution that brought it about is indicative of blues’s location in the early twenty-first-century imagination. The specificity of African Americans’ experiences of oppression and subjugation – vital elements in the formation of the blues – are ameliorated by an all-encompassing ‘American’ journey. Treating the blues as a ‘root’ of genres such as rock ‘n’ roll and country locates its importance in subsequent (and predominantly white) derivations rather than in the genre’s appeal for African American performers and audiences.<sup>39</sup>

Yet descriptions of the blues’s uniquely American character overlook the copious evidence of African American music’s international spread during the twentieth century. As E. Taylor Atkins points out, jazz circulated around the globe virtually since its inception, and can be thought of as ‘both product and instigator of early-twentieth-century processes and trends that were global in scope’. Atkins argues for a view of jazz as both ‘national’ and ‘postnational’: firmly identified with America, yet international in both its origins and its ascendancy.<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately, Atkins observes, historians have often been reluctant to explore the complexities of jazz’s ‘postnational’ story, preferring to incorporate jazz’s international spread into a monolithic narrative that romanticises the appeal of American culture overseas. This approach can be seen clearly in the congressional resolution, which portrays the music’s intra-genre and international appeal – from blues to rock, from America to the world – as a bolster to the blues’s status as valuable, *American* culture.

This thesis embraces the simultaneity of the national and postnational that Atkins describes. I draw on Paul Gilroy’s pioneering work, which recognises black

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<sup>39</sup> McClary, *Conventional Wisdom*, p. 60.

<sup>40</sup> E. Taylor Atkins, ‘Towards a Global History of Jazz’, in *Jazz Planet*, ed. by E. Taylor Atkins (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), pp. xi-xxviii (p. xiii).

music's power 'to slip its moorings and leave home', frequently exchanging their ties to national identity for more amorphous forms of hybridity, variegation, and redefinition in international contexts.<sup>41</sup> I argue that the blues's appeal in the UK between the 1930s and the 1960s lay not simply in its evocation of African American experience. For British listeners, performers, and critics, the blues gained its meaning not only from its origins, but also from its international circulation. This very mobility formed the basis of British enthusiasts' perceptions of African American music's vitality and power.

Consequently, I seek to refine the scholarly approach that I detail above, in which white audiences' 'invented' understandings of the blues are revealed as reflections of their 'distance' from a putative source. Engagement with the blues took broader forms than exoticism: Atkins shows how jazz has been used in international contexts 'to explore in depth particular social, cultural, aesthetic, and musical problems', '[to craft] collective and/or personal musical identities', and as an agent of revolt as well as of cohesion.<sup>42</sup> This thesis interprets British engagement with the blues in these broader terms. First, I seek to move away from existing reception histories by considering how ideas about the blues's development, meaning, and value intersected with British enthusiasts' practices of performing and listening. Scholars' emphasis on the construction of romanticised, fetishised, or fictitious interpretations of blues history relies on a particular interpretation of how these histories have been constructed. Christian O'Connell, for instance, supports his reading of Paul Oliver's criticism with Eric Hobsbawm's conception of 'the invention of tradition' as an 'elaborate language of symbolic practice and

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<sup>41</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> Atkins, 'Towards a Global History of Jazz', pp. xxii-xxv.

communication'.<sup>43</sup> In contrast, I prefer another aspect of Hobsbawm's formulation, in which an 'invented tradition' itself is defined as

a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition.<sup>44</sup>

Here Hobsbawm's examination of the processes by which a tradition is 'invented' emphasises repeated actions and ritual participation. In short, when looking at British engagement with the blues, we need to examine not only how it was described by critics and researchers, but how their writings fitted with appreciation activities such as listening, collecting, researching, performing, socialising, or travelling. This is particularly important when examining early 'hot' record collecting and the growth of the New Orleans 'revival' movement. Despite the range of activities associated with both phenomena, scholars approach collecting and reviving as intellectual or ideological projects: the development of values and vocabulary to appraise 'authentic' jazz and distinguish it from impostors. I refer to these practices as cultures of participation, focusing in particular on the slippage between enthusiasts' ideals and their realities. As Atkins has noted, these activities often related as much to musicians' concerns about musical culture in Britain as they did to an idealised vision of African American music.

Second, emphasising enthusiasts' activities reveals their commitment to African American culture as a driving force. Scholars' eagerness to expose the romanticising, essentialising, and exoticising assumptions at the heart of white enthusiasts' understanding of the blues has the unfortunate effect of obscuring these

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<sup>43</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, rev. edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 1-14 (p. 6).

<sup>44</sup> Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', p. 1.

enthusiasts' good intentions. While I am not suggesting that we ignore the cultural politics of white encounters with black music, I am keen to foreground the value that musicians and audiences during the period under investigation located in ideas we now find uncomfortable. As Ingrid Monson, drawing on Cornel West, points out, scholars need to consider the productive elements of white engagement with African American music alongside its more problematic aspects. Such an engagement undoubtedly reifies assumptions about African Americans' authenticity in the service of white enthusiasts' social transgressions. Yet, as West describes,

the Afro-Americanization of white youth [...] has facilitated more human interaction with black people. Listening to Motown records in the sixties or dancing to hip hop music in the nineties may not lead one to question the sexual myths of black women and men, but when white and black kids buy the same billboard hits and laud the same athletic heroes *the result is often a shared cultural space where some humane interaction takes place*.<sup>45</sup>

In a similar way, notions of 'otherness' that scholars have identified in British enthusiasts' engagement with the blues can be interpreted as attempts to reconfigure musical production and appreciation in a more equitable form. Jazz 'revivalists' did not crave 'authentic' black expression solely for their own pleasure; they did so with a view to improving contemporary economies of recording and touring. In doing so, they hoped to provide opportunities for musicians' whose careers had declined, as well as to generate interactions between African American and British musicians.

This thesis does not attempt a comprehensive history of British blues or jazz interest. Rather, I focus on four key 'moments' spread chronologically across the

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<sup>45</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), pp. 121-122; quoted in Ingrid Monson, 'The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 48.3 (Autumn 1995), 396-422, p. 422.

period that engage critically with the politics of encounter, reception, and performance that I have described above. Not coincidentally, these moments correspond to four key ‘firsts’ in the history of blues and jazz interest: the first concerted efforts at issuing jazz and blues on record by British labels and the establishing of a dedicated jazz appreciation culture, the activities of the first British ‘New Orleans revival’ jazz band, the first visits by African American ‘folk blues’ musicians, and the first transatlantic collaborations between American and British blues performers. These moments were not chosen for their novelty; rather, they each provide an opportunity to test entrenched ideas about the transatlantic circulation of blues and jazz against documentary evidence. It is also fitting that, given the overlapping nature of blues and jazz throughout the period I am investigating, two of my chapters examine moments that would be conventionally described as ‘jazz history’ while the other two address moments in conventional ‘blues history’.

Chapter 1 examines British record labels’ introduction of ‘hot rhythm’ record series after 1929, and the subsequent formation of the Rhythm Club movement in 1933. I explore how these two phenomena played a key role in extending the audibility of jazz and blues on record in the United Kingdom, in particular records made by African American musicians. Furthermore, I show how emerging ‘hot’ criticism created a new vocabulary around jazz and blues that emphasised African Americans’ proficiency and creative artistry, but also established a complex relationship with earlier primitivist tropes and Eurocentric ideals of ‘art music’. Importantly, too, I contextualise ‘hot rhythm’ record collecting and listening activities in contemporary ideals of connoisseurship, exploring how the development of new ideas about the cultural value of ‘hot rhythm’ derived from these activities

and their intersection with existing musical leisure pursuits. Finally, I consider how Rhythm Club activities challenge existing interpretations of recording-based encounters with African American music, and how these practices might inform current scholars' approaches to ideas of distance and mediation in British jazz and blues interest.

In Chapter 2, my focus shifts to the New Orleans revival of the 1940s. I draw on existing scholarship to trace how a new narrative of jazz's origins, development, and essential character that emerged amongst 'hot' record collectors in the United States during the late 1930s took hold amongst British critics and performers during the Second World War. Importantly, while Britain's adoption of the New Orleans revival is often understood as a nostalgic turn towards purism and traditionalism informed by prescriptive ideology, I use an examination of the career of George Webb's Dixielanders to explore how revivalism operated as a direct response to the impact of the Second World War on British jazz culture. What is more, the Dixielanders' position within the New Orleans revival challenges how we think about the transatlantic spread of this movement, as well as our understanding of revivalism as a critical and performative framework.

Chapter 3 shifts the focus away from the activities of British performers and enthusiasts to explore the reception of 'folk blues' in Britain during the immediate postwar period. Through an examination of the debut tours of blues guitarists Josh White and Big Bill Broonzy, I explore how the blues was understood on the one hand as 'rooted' in African American society and experience, yet also capable of signifying broader affinities that transcended boundaries of race and nation. Through an examination of British critical writing about 'race' recording artists and the circulation of American folklore scholarship, I argue that 'folk blues' was perceived

to offer a rare glimpse into the African American musical past. At the same time, ‘folk blues’ acquired political resonance through its championing by leftwing causes on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as through its use in propaganda broadcasting and postwar cultural diplomacy. Bringing these contexts to bear on the British reception of Josh White and Big Bill Broonzy, I examine how each musician was required to navigate a complex terrain of ideals and expectations, with varying degrees of success.

In my final chapter, I examine musical and social interaction between British performers Otilie Patterson and Chris Barber, and the African American urban blues musician Muddy Waters and his immediate musical network between 1958 and 1959. While existing scholarship has concentrated on the reception of Waters’s distinctive style of urban blues during his 1958 British tour, I position these musicians’ encounters within an emerging system of transatlantic exchange, a product of the recent relaxation of union restrictions on foreign musicians’ tours. At stake during Waters’s tour was not the authenticity of his performance style, but the success of his British promoters and accompanists in supporting him. These issues could work both ways, too: the Barber band toured the United States during 1959, emphasising in interviews and press coverage their interactions with Waters and his Chicago associates. I suggest that this ‘economy of exchange’ indicates a shift in values, complicating revivalist ideals of black music as a culture under threat and suggesting new modes of encounter based on ideals of reciprocity and collaboration.

## I. 'A New Departure': Rhythm Clubs, Record Series, and the Appreciation of 'Hot Rhythm' Music in Britain, c.1929-1937

*The gregariousness of man shows itself in many odd ways. The latest manifestation is the springing up, all over the country, of Hot Record Circles, or, as they are alternatively known, Rhythm Clubs. The object of these clubs is to gather together devotees of hot music. The general procedure is for the club's members to congregate periodically and listen to hot records. That the selfsame records are owned by 90 per cent of the club members, and have already been played over and over again in the seclusion of their own homes, is no deterrent, apparently, to listening to them again in public. It is peculiar, but, from our point of view, praiseworthy.*

— Percy Mathison-Brooks, 'Record Circles', *Melody Maker*, 29 July 1933, p. 10.

Rhythm Clubs were a crucial development in the history of British jazz appreciation.

Their foundation signals a broader shift in attitudes towards jazz music: once a popular, hedonistic 'craze' with connotations of excess and moral degeneracy, jazz was increasingly understood to have artistic depth similar to western 'art' music, and to require focused attention.<sup>1</sup> Recording-based jazz appreciation more broadly shifted listening and appreciation activities away from London's nighttime underworld, hotel ballrooms, and restaurants, and into domestic and local informal leisure spaces.<sup>2</sup> By the mid-1930s, the Rhythm Club movement numbered between 90 and 100 clubs, representing an approximately 4,000-strong connoisseur audience for recorded jazz spread across the country.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Tackley (as Catherine Parsonage), *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain, 1880-1935* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 71, 77; Alf Arvidsson, "'Mike" Discourses on Hot Jazz: Discursive Strategies in the Writings of Spike Hughes, 1931-33', *Popular Music History*, 4.3 (2009), 251-269, pp. 251-252.

<sup>2</sup> Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain*, p. 191.

<sup>3</sup> Accounts of how many clubs were in existence vary. Roberta Freund Schwartz reports over 100 clubs in existence by the end of 1934, whereas Parsonage cites 90 clubs by 1935. This figure appears to come from press coverage of the formation of the British Rhythm Club Federation in May 1935, in which Bill Elliott reflected on the collective power of 90 clubs and 4000 members. See Bill Elliott, 'British Rhythm Club Federation', *Hot News*, May 1935, p. 23; Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain*, pp. 72-73; Roberta Freund Schwartz, *How Britain Got The Blues: The*



These transformations were not without complexity, however. Jazz occupied contested space, existing in the British public's imagination as both 'art' and 'popular' music.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, record-based appreciation of jazz was a novel – if not peculiar – social practice, as Mathison-Brooks's editorial implies. Shifting jazz appreciation and criticism into a domestic and broadly amateur sphere can be understood as part of a wider 'democratisation of culture' common to this period.<sup>5</sup> As jazz critic David Gelly has observed, Rhythm Club membership was 'overwhelmingly male and largely middle-class', while the clubs themselves convened 'in an atmosphere redolent of pipe smoke and the saloon bar'.<sup>6</sup> No longer confined to elite nightclubs and hotels, jazz *on record* became a pastime of the middle classes, transferred from the urban entertainment industry to the suburban home and neighbourhood.<sup>7</sup> But ideas about jazz's meaning and value that were generated by people so invested in its cultural worth – yet so divorced from the environment of its creation – were riven with contradiction. The availability of American 'hot' records in Britain was facilitated by corporate arrangements between international recording companies that allowed British companies to draw from a wide spectrum of music in their American counterparts' catalogues.<sup>8</sup> Yet enthusiasts

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*Transmission and Reception of American Blues Style in the United Kingdom* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 10. Historian Eric Hobsbawm reports 98 had been formed by the end of 1935, 'of which perhaps fifty were really active'. See Eric Hobsbawm [as Francis Newton], *The Jazz Scene* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1959), p. 246.

<sup>4</sup> Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain*, p. 53.

<sup>5</sup> D. L. Le Mahieu, *A Culture For Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between The Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> Dave Gelly, *An Unholy Row: Jazz in Britain and its Audience, 1945-1960* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2014), p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Tackley, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain*, p. 72.

<sup>8</sup> Parlophone, a subsidiary of German recording company Carl Lindström AG, had entered the British market in 1923 but was acquired by the US-based Columbia Graphophone Company in 1925, thereby bringing Parlophone into the Columbia 'stable'. This alignment provided Parlophone with access to Columbia's existing

continually sought to distance jazz from the broader entertainment industry, despite the fact that the very objects of their interest, recordings, were its most attractive new commodity.<sup>9</sup> Significantly, too, enthusiasts' desire to imbue jazz with 'art' status floundered on the issue of race. While 'hot' enthusiasts' acknowledgment of African American musicians' abilities and cultural importance stood out at a time when derogatory depictions of black expressive culture were still commonplace, their understanding of African American musical skill and ingenuity nevertheless rested upon primitivist and essentialist stereotypes.<sup>10</sup>

This chapter will trace the emergence of new ideas about 'hot' jazz through developments in the consumption and appreciation of jazz on record after 1929. It is important to note that the consumption and appreciation of 'hot' jazz on record was not unique to Britain in this period. Similar transformations occurred amongst jazz enthusiasts in the United States and on the Continent (particularly in France), likewise manifesting themselves in the proliferation of written criticism and organisations dedicated to the appreciation of 'hot' jazz.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, there is a

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jazz and 'race' record catalogues, in particular those recordings released on the American 'Okeh' label. Similar arrangements existed with the other major British recording companies: the Gramophone Company, for instance, issued records in the UK under their flagship 'His Master's Voice' label, but was also affiliated to the New Jersey-based Victor Talking Machine Company, one of the major producers of African American jazz recordings on its Victor and Bluebird labels. The British elements of the Graphophone and Gramophone companies merged in 1931 to create a single entity, Electric and Musical Instruments (EMI), a merger that further increased UK labels' ability to populate their own catalogues with a wide variety of American recordings. See Norman Field, 'Bix Beiderbecke on British Parlophone 78s', <<http://www.normanfield.com/parlophone.htm>> [accessed 10 December 2017]; Frank Philips, 'Parlophone's New "Rhythm-Style" Series', *The Discographer Magazine*, 2.6 (June 2015), 12-22, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> James Nott, *Music for the People: Popular Music and Dance in Interwar Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain*, p. 66-67.

<sup>11</sup> In France, the record collector Hugues Panassié co-founded the Hot Club de France in 1932, as well as publishing a journal of jazz criticism and record reviews, *Jazz Hot*, from 1934 onwards. Another French enthusiast, Charles Delaunay,

need for scholars to investigate the development and key values of these national jazz appreciation cultures, as well as how they responded to their wider social and cultural contexts. As Catherine Tackley observes, while the Rhythm Club movement is recognised as crucial to the development and character of British jazz appreciation, few historians have examined the goings on of Rhythm Club meetings, their relationship to other forms of music appreciation, or the identities of their participants.<sup>12</sup> In addition to the activities of Rhythm Clubs, I examine the instigation of special ‘record series’ introduced by record companies including Parlophone and HMV to disseminate and popularise ‘hot’ jazz among a growing audience of enthusiasts. I begin by examining the developments in how listeners understood ‘hot’ jazz, before examining how these perspectives were manifested in enthusiasts’ appreciation activities: chiefly, the purchasing of ‘hot’ rhythm records and participation in Rhythm Clubs. In the second half of this chapter, I examine the appreciation of jazz on record as a social practice, to understand how listeners’ identities as ‘connoisseurs’ of ‘hot’ jazz were enacted and inculcated through participation in Rhythm Club culture. I close the chapter by reflecting on how the Rhythm Club movement and 1930s ‘hot’ appreciation more broadly can nuance existing approaches to early British jazz appreciation.

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published the first comprehensive discography of jazz, *Hot Discographie* in 1936. See Bruce Boyd Raeburn, *New Orleans Style and the Writing of Jazz History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), p. 46; Andy Fry, *Paris Blues: African American Music and French Popular Culture, 1920-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), pp. 109, 113-119. In the United States, students at colleges in the liberal northeast, particularly Princeton and Yale, gradually built a network of ‘hot’ collectors during the late 1920s and early 1930s, becoming a nationwide community for aficionados of recorded jazz. See Raeburn, *New Orleans Style*, pp. 41-45.

<sup>12</sup> Catherine Tackley, ‘Rhythm Clubs: Ideals and Realities’, paper presented at Rhythm Changes III: Jazz Beyond Borders, Conservatorium von Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 4-7 September 2014.

## Defining 'Hot'

Interest in 'hot' jazz did not begin with the Rhythm Club movement, but with the increasing availability of American jazz on record over the course of the 1920s. Tackley has observed how the increased audibility of recorded jazz during this period meant that the music was progressively distinguished from dance music, most often through record reviews in periodicals such as *Melody Maker* and *Rhythm* (founded in 1926 and 1927 respectively).<sup>13</sup> One early strategy had been to advocate for the appropriation and 'improvement' of jazz by moulding it to existing 'classical' conventions.<sup>14</sup> 'Hot', however, was increasingly outlined as a style and approach to jazz performance that was itself akin to 'art' music, and that did not require improvement or 'taming' by symphonic convention.<sup>15</sup> This transformation can be seen through the pages of the *Melody Maker* during the first half of 1927. By May of that year, the *Melody Maker* had begun to organise its record reviews into what were becoming widely understood generic divisions: 'hot style', 'popular dance record', and 'rhythmic concert record'.<sup>16</sup> The distinctiveness of 'hot' as a generic category was further solidified two years later in November 1929, when the Parlophone Record Company instigated its 'New "Rhythm-Style" Series', a programme of record releases especially devoted to 'hot' jazz. Other companies followed suit, most notably His Masters' Voice, which introduced a series of 'Modern Rhythm Records' in 1931. In both cases, each month's releases were listed in Parlophone's and HMV's catalogues under the general heading of 'dance music', with records from 'hot rhythm' (HMV) or 'rhythm style' (Parlophone) series appearing alongside pre-

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<sup>13</sup> Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain*, p. 69.

<sup>14</sup> Simon Frith, 'Playing with Real Feeling: Making Sense of Jazz in Britain', *new formations*, 4 (Spring 1988), 7-24, p. 16; Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain*, pp. 53-56.

<sup>15</sup> Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain*, p. 191.

<sup>16</sup> Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain*, p. 71.

existing dance categories such as ‘foxtrot’, ‘rumba’, ‘tango’, or ‘waltz’. Following the lead of music periodicals like the *Melody Maker*, too, record companies began to include descriptive introductions to their latest releases in order to direct enthusiasts’ listening and appreciation.<sup>17</sup> This ‘explanatory material’, noted the *Melody Maker*, acted both as a marketing ploy and to inculcate a common set of expectations and standards around the ‘hot rhythm’ records being offered to the public.<sup>18</sup>

‘Hot rhythm’ music was understood as both innovative and modern. Both Parlophone’s and HMV’s inaugural adverts highlighted the up-to-the-minute nature of their releases, promising consumers ‘the very latest developments in [...] modern popular rhythmic music’ and ‘the most advanced trains of thought in modern rhythmic interpretation’ respectively.<sup>19</sup> Parlophone described their ‘Rhythm-Style’ series as a daring gamble, suggesting that some of its releases were ‘likely to be too advanced for the British Public’; this was why other ‘less progressive’ record labels had settled for releasing more pedestrian dance recordings.<sup>20</sup> To promote ‘hot’ music in this way was a marked departure from how American music had been described only a few years earlier. In *The Gramophone*’s first sustained review of dance music

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<sup>17</sup> I use the term ‘publicity review’ to refer to record reviews published in record companies’ own catalogues, as opposed to reviews by critics in magazines, which often deal with multiple discs from different companies.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Stylus’, ‘The Gramophone Review’, *Melody Maker*, November 1929, p. 1071. It is not clear who was writing behind the ‘Stylus’ pseudonym. While the critic Edgar Jackson had previously written record reviews for the *Melody Maker* under the pseudonym ‘Needlepoint’ and was a regular contributor to *The Gramophone* under his own name, Godbolt points out that in October and November 1929 Jackson was visiting New York, with another unidentified contributor stepping in to fill his reviewing commitments for the *Melody Maker*. See Jim Godbolt, *A History of Jazz in Britain 1919-50*, 4th edn (London: Northway Publications, 2010), pp. 44-45.

<sup>19</sup> ‘New “Rhythm-Style” Records’, *Melody Maker*, November 1929, pp. 1072-1073; The Gramophone Company, *The Catalogue of “His Master's Voice” Records up to and including November 1931* (London: The Gramophone Company, 1931), n.p.

<sup>20</sup> ‘New “Rhythm-Style” Records’. Parlophone’s assertion here ignores the extent to which their ability to release such a wide range of ‘hot rhythm’ records relied on distribution deals with a wide number of American recording concerns. See Philips, ‘Parlophone’s New “Rhythm-Style” Series’, p. 12.

records in 1923, the reviewer portrayed dance music's ceaseless innovation as a product of its inherent ephemerality, noting that dance music was 'typical of the rather restless spirit of that country which is never satisfied [...] but ceaselessly strives for something new.' It was in the style's nature to lose interest with repetition; 'hence', the reviewer observed, 'there is an enormous output of new dance records.'<sup>21</sup> By 1929, in contrast, Parlophone's inaugural advertisement stressed how their 'Rhythm-Style' records 'contain[ed] subtleties, the full enjoyment of which the listener may not gain until he or she has heard them a sufficient number of times to appreciate their underlying ingenuity'.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, the *Melody Maker's* reviewer 'Stylus' praised Parlophone's decision to include explanatory notes in their advertisements, as these would allow the consumer the opportunity to 'familiarise himself with [the records] to be able to understand and so enjoy them'.<sup>23</sup> While publicity material stressed 'hot rhythm' music's pace of innovation, the quality of each recording also drew from the fact that it required repeated listening to appreciate fully. As the Parlophone advertisement proudly stated: 'You will discover something new every time you play these records.'<sup>24</sup>

Record companies' emphasis on the value of repeated listening to 'hot rhythm' records chimes with the strategic positioning of the genre in line with western 'art' music. As both Tackley and Arvidsson have pointed out, record reviews emphasised musicians' technical and musical skill. When discussing larger ensembles, publicity reviews celebrated bandleaders' interpretation of melodies and their ingenuity of orchestration; 'hot' was understood as an aesthetic approach that

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<sup>21</sup> 'New Dance Records', *The Gramophone*, June 1923, p. 40.

<sup>22</sup> 'New "Rhythm-Style" Records'.

<sup>23</sup> 'Stylus', 'The Gramophone Review'.

<sup>24</sup> 'New "Rhythm-Style" Records'.

could be ‘applied’ to contemporary popular songs through arrangements.<sup>25</sup>

Discussing Ellington’s ‘Echoes of the Jungle’ (HMV B6066), a release in HMV’s series of ‘modern rhythm’, the company’s in-house reviewer commended it as a ‘masterpiece of colourful orchestration[,] interpreted with that sense of style and rhythm which belongs only to the finest exponents of the art’.<sup>26</sup> Discussion of small and medium-sized ensembles, in contrast, focused more on soloists’ virtuosity, use of novelty effects, and interaction between ensemble members. HMV’s reviewer heard ‘Tappin’ the Time Away’ by the Washboard Serenaders as relying

almost entirely on the ingenuity of soloists who devise the most unusual effects in an attempt to go one better than each other. The drummer with his washboard and bell plate produces amazingly skillful [sic] rhythms and some quite unique phrases are invented by the guitar, trumpet and piano.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, critic Edgar Jackson’s review in *The Gramophone* of an earlier Serenaders release, ‘Washboards Get Together’, praised the ensemble’s ‘break-neck speed’ and ‘mass of crazy rhythmic effects’ as ‘very modern and in the best traditions of the art [...] performed in a most stylish manner’.<sup>28</sup> By focusing on musicians’ skills of arrangement and improvisation, critics framed key elements of jazz as the product of inspired creativity drawing on romantic ideals of the composer but applying them to the improvising performer.

Critics’ attribution of skill and inspiration to jazz performers was especially significant in the context of recordings featuring African American musicians. As

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<sup>25</sup> Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain*, p. 192-194; Arvidsson, “‘Mike’ Discourses on Hot Jazz’, p. 252.

<sup>26</sup> ‘[Review of B6066]’, *The Catalogue of “His Master’s Voice” Records up to and including November 1931* (London: The Gramophone Company, 1931), n.p.

<sup>27</sup> ‘[Review of B6303]’ *The Catalogue of “His Master’s Voice” Records up to and including November 1933* (London: The Gramophone Company, 1933), n.p.

<sup>28</sup> Edgar Jackson, ‘[Review of B6114]’, *The Gramophone*, February 1932, p. 395.

Tackley points out, the greater opportunities to hear recorded jazz performed by African Americans after the late 1920s forced listeners to account for the contribution that these musicians had made to the development of ‘hot rhythm’ music.<sup>29</sup> African American musicians’ musical abilities – whether in performing or orchestrating – were nevertheless frequently attributed to ethnicity. As the HMV reviewer argued, Ellington’s compositions gave ‘a deep insight into the negro spirit and mentality’.<sup>30</sup> Publicity reviews rarely missed an opportunity to draw parallels between the musical ‘colour’ expected of ‘hot rhythm’ orchestration, and skin colour: Don Redman, the leader of McKinney's Cotton Pickers was, according to HMV’s publicity reviews, ‘one of the finest Negro arrangers’, who brought a ‘captivating wealth of colour and rhythm’ to his ensemble’s performances.<sup>31</sup>

Importantly, the link made between ethnicity and skill is a significant departure from earlier approaches to African American music, in particular those of the 1920s, when styles and practices coded ‘black’ were seen as raw materials awaiting civilisation and improvement by musicians with European training.<sup>32</sup> Early discussions of ‘hot rhythm’ music, prior to the launch of Parlophone’s and other labels’ dedicated record series, rested heavily on more conservative attitudes to black music, centred around popular stereotypes of hypersexuality, violence, and a lack of self control; these were accompanied by the idea that British culture was at risk of moral degradation via the presence of African American music. As Jim Godbolt observes, Edgar Jackson’s earliest reviews of ‘hot rhythm’ music were often replete with racial epithets, and identified not expertise or control but rather energy, ‘pep’,

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<sup>29</sup> Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain*, p. 69.

<sup>30</sup> ‘[Review of B6066]’.

<sup>31</sup> ‘[Review of B6204]’, *The Catalogue of “His Master’s Voice” Records up to and including August 1932* (London: The Gramophone Company, 1932), n.p.

<sup>32</sup> Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain*, p. 221.



and ‘verve’ as trademarks of black performance.<sup>33</sup> By the early 1930s, Jackson’s tone had softened somewhat, but his reviews nevertheless frequently asserted a link between particular musical idioms and African Americans’ supposedly unique skills. This link was perhaps most evident in discussions of performances identified as displaying blues elements. ‘Echoes of the Jungle’, wrote Jackson in *The Gramophone*,

is one of those essentially Negro tunes, the Blues idiom of the melodies [...] always [seems] to touch something in the deeper side of the coloured musician. Ellington is particularly responsive to them, and the ingenious effects he weaves into them only go to enhance the obviousness with which he lays bare the soul of his race.<sup>34</sup>

Here, Jackson attempts to identify racial attributes in the Ellington Orchestra’s performance, located especially in Ellington’s melodic treatment and orchestration techniques. This link is particularly notable since ‘Echoes of the Jungle’ does not follow a conventional twelve-bar blues structure. Jackson’s understanding of the ‘blues idiom’ therefore relied not so much on a formal definition of the blues, such as a harmonic structure, but rather on a more intangible sense of African American ‘character’ or ‘flavour’ that manifested itself in a variety of musical attributes.

While critics’ reactions to ‘hot rhythm’ records were notable in their emphasis on African American musical skill and artistry in performance, they nevertheless couched their writing in terms that inculcated primitivist notions of racial difference. When HMV’s publicity reviewer proclaimed Ellington’s ability to capture ‘the flair for sweet melody for which the Negroes have always been

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<sup>33</sup> Godbolt, *A History of Jazz in Britain 1919-50*, pp. 36, 40-41.

<sup>34</sup> Edgar Jackson, ‘A More Serious Aspect’, *The Gramophone*, November 1931, p. 234.

recognized’,<sup>35</sup> for instance, s/he was engaging in a broad vocabulary of difference that asserted stereotypes of innate black musicality, even though the overall tenor of the review was a recognition of black accomplishment. Comparing reviews of white ensembles with those consisting of African American musicians, all were praised for their ingenuity in orchestration, improvisational skill, and characteristic ‘hot’ tone; yet only African American musicians’ performances were heard to be expressing racial characteristics.

Writing about jazz on record in the late 1920s and early 1930s shows the emergence of a category of ‘hot rhythm’ music. This type of jazz was clearly distinguished from the wider popular music market, and defined by characteristic approaches to rhythm, improvisation, timbre, and orchestration. Understandings of ‘hot rhythm’ emanated both from the writings of critics and record collectors, but also from the marketing campaigns and publicity material of record companies themselves. Importantly, while attitudes to ‘hot rhythm’ ostensibly rejected dominant ideas regarding the hierarchy of ‘art’ and ‘popular’ music, as well as public opinion regarding the characteristics of African American performance, enthusiasts’ writings often left implicit hierarchies of value intact. In the next section, I will attempt to examine the relationship between ideas about ‘hot rhythm’ music and the activities of record collecting and listening.

### **‘Hot Rhythm’ Appreciation in Practice**

The unique cultural status of ‘hot rhythm’ was further emphasised by the manner in which enthusiasts acquired and consumed jazz recordings. Importantly, these practices drew on an earlier attempt to develop recording-led musical appreciation

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<sup>35</sup> ‘[Review of B6066]’, *The Catalogue of “His Master’s Voice” Records up to and including November 1931*.

during the 1920s, one with western ‘art’ music as its focus. In 1923, author, enthusiast, and critic Compton MacKenzie founded *The Gramophone*, a monthly journal dedicated to the appreciation of classical music on record. As historian D. L. LeMahieu observes, MacKenzie’s journal, which continues to this day, ‘was an attempt to mediate the beauties of traditional culture with a neoteric technology’.<sup>36</sup> By reviewing records, discussing gramophone equipment, and advocating for the expansion of record companies’ catalogues of ‘serious’ music, MacKenzie’s project reframed what had previously been a novelty item of domestic furniture and a purveyor of American ‘mass’ culture as a tool for ‘serious’ listening and cultural advancement within the European ‘classical’ tradition. ‘Our policy’, wrote MacKenzie in his first editorial, ‘will be to encourage the recording companies to build up for generations to come a great library of good music’.<sup>37</sup> Although MacKenzie was rarely satisfied with record companies’ releases of ‘serious’ music, his advocacy on behalf of his subscribers succeeded in cementing the ‘connoisseur’ listener as a key – albeit niche – market for gramophone records. It was for precisely this audience that The Gramophone Company instigated its ‘Connoisseur’s Catalogue’ in October 1931, designed as a programme of releases reserved for ‘the best type of music’, and reserved for purchase by special order only.<sup>38</sup> Here resided the masterworks of the European ‘art’ music canon, recorded by the era’s most critically lauded soloists and ensembles: Mozart violin concerti by Yehudi Menuhin; the quartets of Debussy, Ravel, Borodin, and Bloch by the Pro Arte Quartet; and Chopin’s preludes by pianist Alfred Cortot. Readers of *The Gramophone* avidly

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<sup>36</sup> D. L. LeMahieu, ‘The Gramophone: Recorded Music and the Cultivated Mind Between the Wars’, *Technology and Culture*, 23.3 (July 1982), 372-391, p. 373.

<sup>37</sup> Compton MacKenzie, ‘Prologue’, *The Gramophone*, April 1923, p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> [His Master's Voice Connoisseur's Catalogue], *Catalogue of “His Master’s Voice” Records up to and including November 1935* (London: The Gramophone Company, 1935), p. 336.

acquired and contemplated these records, either in the comfort of their own homes on finely tuned equipment, or at a meeting of a local 'Gramophone Society', in the pursuit of aesthetic cultivation.

Record companies' marketing of 'hot rhythm' music borrowed a great deal from the connoisseur culture that had developed around 'serious' musical appreciation during the 1920s. 'Hot rhythm' was framed as an artistic tradition with its own narrative of origins, development, and agreed aesthetic criteria. As Edgar Jackson explained in his column of 'hot' and dance records in *The Gramophone* in 1935:

A hot record can be a great attraction in itself, but there is a broader view to be taken. Every hot record is a chapter in the history and evolution of hot music, and when looked at as such it assumes an interest far beyond that which it has when considered merely as an isolated page torn from an unknown book.<sup>39</sup>

Contemporaneous with the 'hot rhythm' record series of the early 1930s were the production of 'connoisseur' or 'survey' albums: HMV released its 'Connoisseur Album of Hot Rhythm Music' in February 1933, featuring ten discs by artists drawn from its existing 'hot' series. Following HMV's lead, Brunswick records – although not a producer of a 'hot' series itself – brought out their 'Short Survey of Modern Rhythm' in December 1934, an eight-disc album aimed to '[open] the entire vista [of 'hot' music] to the ear and understanding of the modern music-lover.' Beginning with a recorded introductory lecture by musician and *Melody Maker* record critic Spike Hughes, and accompanied by a pamphlet of critical 'analysis' of the subsequent discs by Edgar Jackson, the album included recordings by the orchestras

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<sup>39</sup> Edgar Jackson, 'Dance Band and Modern Rhythmic Records', *The Gramophone*, January 1935, p. 312.

of Fletcher Henderson, Luis Russell, and Duke Ellington, as well as by smaller groups led by Louis Armstrong, Henry Allen, Wingy Manone, and Eddie Condon.<sup>40</sup> That the major British labels should issue these recordings is remarkable. Stateside jazz enthusiasts involved in the United Hot Clubs of America (UHCA) reissued early 'hot' jazz recordings from 1934 onwards, but these were confined to the UHCA's own independent label and the network of jazz collectors who frequented the Commodore Record Store in New York City. Other American reissue projects of the 1930s would remain the preserve of independent, collector-led labels such as Hot Record Society (HRS) and Commodore Records. It was not until late 1939 that a major US label, Columbia, decided to enter the jazz reissue market. In contrast, British 'hot rhythm' releases were distributed more widely, and could be ordered from any record shop that stocked Parlophone, HMV, or Brunswick records.<sup>41</sup>

As with the growth of 'serious' music appreciation a decade earlier, the desire to cultivate a shared interest in music on record brought 'hot rhythm' enthusiasts together in person, too. The first stirrings of the Rhythm Club movement began to appear in the musical press during the early summer of 1933. Contributors to the *Melody Maker's* letters page had begun to debate potential mechanisms for the exchange and discussion of 'hot' records. One reader, C. T. Healey, suggested that

as quite a number of [*Melody Maker*] readers must collect 'hot' records, it is quite possible that they have, in their collections, records which they no longer wish to keep. Would it not be possible to devote one column per

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<sup>40</sup> Advertisement quotations from 'Brunswick Announce "A Short Survey of Modern Rhythm"', *The Gramophone*, January 1935, p. xiv.

<sup>41</sup> Raeburn, *New Orleans Style*, pp. 94-97. Interestingly, Raeburn highlights that American Columbia's decision to begin reissuing early jazz records was prompted by their hiring of promoter, critic and record executive John Hammond. Hammond had previously worked for Parlophone and Columbia (UK), and it was his experience of the British demand for American jazz reissues that inspired him to begin the same initiative in the States. See Raeburn, *New Orleans Style*, pp. 105-108.

month to those readers who wish to sell or exchange 'hot' records? By so doing yet another link in the chain of 'hot' music's fortifications would be forged by the new personal contacts made between 'fans'.<sup>42</sup>

Healey had clearly identified a common concern among enthusiasts of 'hot' records, and while readers were sceptical of trusting the Royal Mail to deliver fragile records, they were more open to the idea of 'hot record circles', suggested by Harrow-based enthusiast James Holloway, on 3 June.<sup>43</sup> Holloway proposed to harness the enthusiasm of 'rhythm devotees' to organise regular, local recitals of 'hot rhythm' records in British cities. By the end of the month another 'hot rhythm' devotee, Eric Ballard of Wandsworth, had announced his intention to form such a circle in cooperation with his associate Bill Elliott, modelled on recent gramophone recitals of recent records held at the City Sale & Exchange store on Fleet St. The first meeting of Ballard and Elliott's club was held at 92 High Holborn on 7 July 1933.<sup>44</sup> The *Melody Maker* was eager to support this new venture and duly allowed new clubs to affiliate themselves to the paper, with a guarantee to publish new clubs'

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<sup>42</sup> C. T. Healey, '[Letter]', *Melody Maker*, May 1933, p. 358.

<sup>43</sup> James Holloway, 'Hot Record Cirlces', *Melody Maker*, 3 June 1933, p. 7. The *Melody Maker* transferred from monthly to weekly publication around this time, the first weekly issue dated 26 May 1933. Interestingly, Holloway cited both record recitals by 'commercial concerns' (i.e. record shops) and reading groups set up by a 'literary weekly' as the influence for his idea.

<sup>44</sup> Eric Ballard, '[Letter]', *Melody Maker*, 24 June 1933, p. 19. My account of the formation of Ballard and Elliott's Rhythm Club differs from that presented by Jim Godbolt in his *History of Jazz in Britain 1919-50*. Godbolt mixes up the chronology of Ballard and Elliott's published correspondence in the *Melody Maker*: he ignores Ballard's letter of 24 June, citing instead an advertisement placed by Elliott on 1 July for his own club's forthcoming inaugural meeting, before declaring the first meeting to have taken place a week earlier – on the date of Ballard's initial letter. Godbolt also incorrectly identifies the venue of the club's first meeting. While the club found a regular home at Victory House, on Swallow Street off Regent Street, its first meeting was at a venue on High Holborn. See Godbolt, *A History of Jazz in Britain 1919-50*, p. 140; 'Hot Record Circles Everywhere: "Melody Maker" No. 1 Rhythm Club', *Melody Maker*, 15 July 1933, p. 11; 'More Rhythm Club Developments', *Melody Maker* July 22 1933, p. 9; Bill Elliott, 'What the Rhythm Clubs are Doing', *Hot News*, April 1935, p. 22.

contact details and summaries of activities each week.<sup>45</sup> Ballard and Elliott's club became the *Melody Maker's* 'No. 1' Rhythm Club, and over the following weeks 'rhythm enthusiasts' from across the country wrote to the *Melody Maker* to request that their contact details be advertised for the benefit of forming new local 'record circles'.

At the heart of Rhythm Club meetings was the record recital: a lecture by a club member or invited guest, illustrated with recordings from the speaker's collection, played on the club's gramophone. Although documentation as to the content of these recitals is scant – notices in the *Melody Maker* often only noted the recitalist and their chosen theme – surviving programmes from the No. 1 Rhythm Club covering 1936 and 1937 are held in the National Jazz Archive in Loughton, Essex. These provide vital, if not necessarily wholly representative, clues as to the content of Rhythm Club record recitals. Many recitals surveyed the latest record series releases. In August 1933, for instance, *Melody Maker* reported that meeting of the No. 1 Rhythm Club on 14 August had begun with 'a short address' from the club's president Percy Mathison-Brooks and the vice-president Spike Hughes, followed by a record recital 'disposing of all the interesting issues in the mid-July and August 1st gramophone lists'.<sup>46</sup> Judging by Edgar Jackson's 'hot rhythm' record reviews for July and August in *The Gramophone*, this recital would have featured up to eighteen discs – nearly two hours of music – listened to in a single three-hour meeting.<sup>47</sup> In this sense, Rhythm Club activities sought to complement existing patterns of record consumption by giving publicity to record companies' series and album releases. Indeed, this emphasis on commercially available discs likely

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<sup>45</sup> Godbolt, *A History of Jazz in Britain, 1919-50*, p. 141.

<sup>46</sup> 'The Hot Rhythm Club Movement', *Melody Maker*, 19 August 1933, p. 2.

<sup>47</sup> 'Stars Support Hot Rhythm Circle (No. 2)', *Melody Maker*, 19 August 1933, p. 9 reports a meeting running from 9pm-c.12am.

stemmed from the origins of the Rhythm Club concept in the record recitals held at the City Sale & Exchange music shop, where Ballard and Elliott had recently met. In March 1933, prior to the formation of the first ‘Hot Record Circles’, the *Melody Maker*’s columnist ‘Busker’ recalled a recital where ‘in addition to the playing of the latest Rhythm Style issues of Parlophone and Brunswick, H.M.V.’s Connoisseur Album of “hot style” records was played through in its entirety’.<sup>48</sup>

In line with discussions and criticism in the contemporary musical press, recitals also frequently pursued themes that outlined the history, development, and artistic value of jazz. A common recital approach was the bio-discography: a survey of a musician’s or an ensemble’s career through their available recordings. At the 20 January 1936 meeting of the No. 1 Rhythm Club, drummer and ‘hot rhythm’ collector Carlo Krahmer gave a recital entitled ‘Earl Hines[:] “King of the Ivories”’. Krahmer’s recital compared African American pianists Earl Hines and the younger Teddy Wilson, using a perceived rivalry between the two as a basis for the comparison. To Krahmer’s ears, Hines was the victor because Wilson, despite his recent career advances, ‘ha[d] reached his zenith’ by playing in a style ‘obviously based on that of Hines’.<sup>49</sup> Krahmer’s somewhat superficial verdict shows a scepticism of imitation and derivation, placing value instead on an idealised autonomous artist, at once part of a broader musical tradition yet guided only by personal vision.<sup>50</sup> It is also no coincidence that Krahmer chose Hines – effectively an ‘old master’ due to his presence on some of the earliest ‘hot’ records released by

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<sup>48</sup> ‘Busker’, ‘Hottest Place in Town’, *Melody Maker*, March 1933, p. 171.

<sup>49</sup> Carlo Krahmer, ‘Earl Hines, “King of the Ivories”’, No. 1 Rhythm Club Programme, 20 January 1936, National Jazz Archive, Concert Programmes Collection.

<sup>50</sup> One might also view Krahmer’s investigation to be biased from the start, given his stated desire ‘to try and prove what Armstrong said is true: “that [Hines] is the greatest jazz pianist the world has ever seen”.’



British record labels and his association with Louis Armstrong – rather than an acolyte like Wilson.

Other recitalists chose broader themes to further shore up jazz's status as 'art'. In January 1936, collector and recitalist Maurice Dunmore – visiting from the Northampton Rhythm Club – attempted a survey of jazz's key aesthetic components in his recital 'The Seven Pillars of Jazz'. Dunmore selected seven musicians, each representing a fundamental element of jazz: Trumpeter Louis Armstrong represented – to Dunmore's ears at least – 'the jazz style', his recording of 'Dear Old Southland' showcasing 'all his best ideas [...] without any exaggeration or hysteria'. Saxophonist Coleman Hawkins's appearance on the Fletcher Henderson record 'I've Got To Sing A Torch Song', in contrast, exemplified a more elegant yet no less fundamental take on the jazz 'style': 'a successful mixture of jazz and legitimate music [which] takes the coarseness out of our jazz without destroying it.' After 'style' came attributes of orchestral timbre and swing, represented by the orchestras of Duke Ellington and Luis Russell. Ellington merited a further appearance in Dunmore's recital as the embodiment of another essential attribute – composition – a practice that was 'vital if jazz is to have any permanent value'. Here Dunmore also included the British bandleader and composer Spike Hughes, citing his compositions 'Sirocco' and 'Sweet Sorrow Blues' as illustrations of how Hughes had been 'influenced by Ellington and may encourage further composers'. Finally, the recital concluded with a recording of Benny Carter's arrangement of 'Limehouse Blues' by the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra to highlight the importance of arranging since the emergence of larger jazz ensembles.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Maurice Dunmore, 'The Seven Pillars of Jazz', No. 1 Rhythm Club Programme, 6 January 1936, NJA, Concert Programmes Collection. It is interesting that Dunmore

Dunmore's recital is clearly hidebound to the conventional characteristics of 'serious' music as a measure of jazz's value. Notably absent is any discussion of improvisation as a technique; Dunmore prefers to emphasise the more 'formal' practices of composition and arrangement. Furthermore, his commentary bears dubious resemblance to the audible evidence: while his selection of 'Dear Old Southland' suggests a clear preference for the more reflective improvisatory style that Armstrong displays on this record, it is odd that Dunmore should have distinguished it as more authentic to 'the jazz style' compared to Armstrong's more lively, uptempo performance approaches. Likewise, Dunmore's description of Coleman Hawkins's playing as a sanitised and palatable type of jazz captures little of the subtlety associated with the saxophonist's records. Such a dogmatic adherence to 'art' music's key precepts illustrates the lengths to which 'hot rhythm' enthusiasts were prepared to go in order to situate jazz outside of the culture industry from which it had originated.

Crucially, Dunmore's recital also illustrates the ease with which a listener could exert their own critical authority over the music they heard. A number of scholars have focused on record-based engagement with jazz as having a highly mediating effect on listeners' responses to the music. Blues historian Roberta Schwartz argues that:

the ability to play and replay a frozen live performance permitted scrupulously detailed aural analyses of jazz, as well as a sense of deep engagement [...] [With] recorded jazz the listener could respond with clinical detachment rather than [...] emotional reaction.<sup>52</sup>

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chooses to emphasise Hughes and Carter here, in contrast to his inattention to Henderson as an arranger in his own right.

<sup>52</sup> Schwartz, *How Britain Got The Blues*, p. 14.

Both record recitals and record companies' promotional material attempted to draw on this sense of 'clinical detachment' by encouraging rhythm record consumers to appreciate these recordings from an objective, distanced position, assessing the relative merits of different artists' skills or of the performances themselves relative to other ensembles. In contrast, Marybeth Hamilton has connected listeners' hearing of black music as emotionally powerful with an enthusiasm for the act of listening itself:

[The] sense of awe and wonder was accentuated by the disks' [sic] physical properties, the unforthcoming appearance of these blank, black platters whose spiral grooves, once set in motion, released magical echoes from another world.<sup>53</sup>

While these two positions – of emotional detachment and voyeuristic involvement – may appear diametrically opposed, they nevertheless support Jed Rasula's interpretation of recordings as 'seductive' media, which allow listeners to exercise their own control over meaning, *even while they claim to be representing its intrinsic cultural worth*. In short, recordings provide to cultural 'gate-keepers' such as critics, promoters, and discographers a set of artefacts that can be arranged to shore up prevailing attitudes to race and cultural expression, or to bolster overarching, teleological narratives of jazz's development and value as 'art'.<sup>54</sup>

Recordings' mediating power is weaved into many popular accounts of British 'hot' connoisseurship. In a 1947 issue of the American *Harper's Magazine*,

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<sup>53</sup> Marybeth Hamilton, 'The Voice of the Blues', *History Workshop Journal*, 54 (2002), 123-143, pp. 138-139.

<sup>54</sup> Jed Rasula, 'The Media of Memory: The Seductive Menace of Records in Jazz History', in Krin Gabbard (ed.), *Jazz Among the Discourses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 134-162. For more on overarching jazz narratives and the construction of canon, see Scott DeVeaux, 'Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography', *Black American Literature Forum*, 25 (Autumn 1991), 525-560.

the German-American filmmaker, jazz critic, and anthropologist Ernest Borneman recalled his early encounters with British ‘hot’ enthusiasts while a student at Cambridge in the early 1930s. Asking his readers to bear in mind ‘the European jazz fan[’s] [...] utter dependence upon phonograph records’, Borneman explained how they were ‘cut off from the living music by time as well as space’ and consequently experienced ‘a peculiar shift in values [...] the record becomes more important than the music’.<sup>55</sup> ‘Hot’ enthusiasts, Borneman argued, were attracted to the tenuous critical authority that came with playing records to Rhythm Club members. He recalls how

one [...] ‘critic’ after another would make his stand before the public by putting his favorite records on a big phonograph and expecting the entranced members to nod their heads in unison to the succession of adverbs and adjectives that formed the basis of the running commentary. Every once in a while a ‘critic’ who had once had his shoes shined by Bix Beiderbecke’s favorite bootblack would give a guest recital, and those evenings were the highspots of the season.

Borneman saw the same issues of self-inflated opinion masquerading as critical objectivity in attempts to establish a ‘Federation of British Rhythm Clubs’ in 1935. While the organisation ostensibly stood for ‘four thousand determined members’, Borneman recalls that

somehow no more than one member could ever be found who was wholly in agreement with himself and in this the jazz movement continued to live up to its highest tradition.

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<sup>55</sup> Ernest Borneman, ‘The Jazz Cult: Intimate Memoirs of an Acolyte’, *Harper’s Magazine*, February 1947, 141-147, pp. 144-147.

The self-interest and parochialism on the part of Rhythm Club participants suggested by Borneman's satirical accounts chime well with Rasula's and Hamilton's conceptualisations of record-based engagement with jazz. Having control over which recordings were heard at a Rhythm Club meeting, and consequently what merited inclusion in the 'hot rhythm' canon, meant that debates and meetings frequently descended into pedantry and pontification. Borneman reserves his staunchest criticism for record collectors and discographers, whom he describes as asocial in the extreme, their enjoyment of jazz's emotional pull replaced by the routine and methodical organisation of the physical discs themselves.<sup>56</sup>

The availability of 'hot rhythm' on record inspired dedicated engagement. The formation of Rhythm Clubs provided enthusiasts with the means to hear the latest records, records that were hard to get hold of, and identify contemporaries who shared their passion. The record recital that was central to the Rhythm Club format allowed club members to explore issues of style, canonicity, and authenticity in the records they played. Importantly, these activities played on a malleability at the heart of record-based engagement, where recordings could be arranged to support the overarching ideals of their listener, even while the listener himself (or herself) imagined that they were drawing their ideas about the music objectively from the

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<sup>56</sup> Borneman recounts his acquaintance with a young medical student, whom he refers to as 'Norman', who he met during the university vacation: 'he lived with his mother in a small musty house near Golders Green [...] In a huge attic [...] Norman's collection of records was piled up from floor to ceiling in solid towers with the weight and thickness of a primeval forest [...] Norman, I think, was the first real jazz collector I had ever met. In more than one way he struck me as a completely new mutation of man. He was taciturn to the point of inarticulateness [...] [yet] his mind had the scope and infallibility of one of those electronic brains that comes up with an answer to any kind of question you can think of.' Likewise, Borneman recalls another collector, named 'Chick', 'who had given up *listening* to records long ago so that he could more wholeheartedly devote himself to the serious business of cataloguing all the records he could have heard if the cataloguing had left him any time for such idle fripperies.' Borneman, 'The Jazz Cult', p. 145.

music they heard on disc. An overreliance on this curatorial power has become strongly identified with Rhythm Club activity in subsequent literature, together with the idea that record-based engagement with jazz produces a distorted encounter with the music. In the next section, I will examine these common assumptions before investigating the way in which ‘hot rhythm’ appreciation was embedded in contemporary social life.

### **Rhythm Clubs Reconsidered**

The dichotomy between an ‘original’ performance culture and its ‘distanced’ consumers, who encounter the culture through the mediation of recordings, is of only limited use when discussing the international reception and dissemination of jazz. Scholars and popular historians have resorted to easy caricatures of record collectors and enthusiasts as obsessive, idiosyncratic, or simply wrong due to their location in a non-American space. Scott DeVeaux falls into this trap when discussing the work of French critic, historian, and promoter Hugues Panassié:

For Panassié, the history of jazz was necessarily abstract, a narrative to be deduced from the evidence of recordings and supported by shadowy speculation. In America, by contrast, that history was more concrete.<sup>57</sup>

Here, DeVeaux finds fault not so much with Panassié’s ideas as with his cultural and geographical distance from a more tangible American-centric jazz culture, implying that Panassié’s ideas intrinsically carry less interpretative weight than those made by his US-based contemporaries. Panassié’s distance from the United States certainly played a role in forming his understanding of jazz; indeed, in his 1942 book *The Real Jazz*, Panassié reflects on how his visits to the United States during the late

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<sup>57</sup> DeVeaux, ‘Constructing the Jazz Tradition’, p. 532.

1930s caused him to reconsider the critical judgements he had made in his earlier writings.<sup>58</sup> That said, it is arguably more productive to think about how both American and non-American critics have been informed by their changing position relative to African American performance culture. Moreover, Tackley observes that the popularity of Rasula's interpretation of recordings as 'seductive media' grates against another widely-held assumption, that record-based engagement with jazz results in 'the loss of the integrative social function of jazz performance practice'.<sup>59</sup> Tackley proposes instead a greater emphasis on the way that recordings themselves function as 'social texts', in particular recordings' ability

to transcend and blur past, present, and future and to be heard anew in multiple historical and geographical contexts.<sup>60</sup>

British 'hot rhythm' collecting and appreciation attracted a particular demographic: predominantly male and residing in the lower-middle echelons of the British class system.<sup>61</sup> Historian Eric Hobsbawm, writing in 1959 under the pseudonym Francis Newton, locates the 'jazz public' of the 1930s within

that social zone in which the sons of skilled workers, probably themselves in office jobs, met the sons of white-collar workers, shopkeepers, small business men, and the like: from the 'lower-middle class'. Clerking, small business, the drawing-board, accountancy, commercial art, the lower reaches

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<sup>58</sup> Hugues Panassié, *The Real Jazz*, rev. edn (London: Thomas Yoseloff, 1960), pp. 9-11.

<sup>59</sup> Catherine Tackley, 'Jazz Recordings as Social Texts', in *Recorded Music: Society, Technology and Performance*, ed. by Amanda Bayley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 167-186 (pp. 167-168).

<sup>60</sup> Tackley, 'Jazz Recordings as Social Texts', p. 170.

<sup>61</sup> Nott, *Music for the People*, p. 18; Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 97; both quoted in Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain*, p. 72.

of journalism, the fringes of show business, provided the jazz lover's professions.<sup>62</sup>

The ideals of domesticity that gave rise to the popularity of the gramophone were part of a broader growth in suburban living during the 1920s and 30s.<sup>63</sup> Rhythm Clubs likewise reflected this growth: while the UK's major cities were each home to a Rhythm Club, what is most notable is their presence on the periphery of larger cities, and in provincial towns.<sup>64</sup>

For Simon Frith, this suburban context for 'hot' appreciation forms part of a larger narrative of successive 'local appropriations' of American – and particularly African American – expressive culture that stretches back to the popularity of minstrelsy in the nineteenth century. As Frith explains,

Black Americans became deep coded as the 'other' of lower-middle-class relaxation, a source of musical access (less daunting than bourgeois concert forms) to one's heart and soul.<sup>65</sup>

'Hot rhythm' enthusiasts' idealisation of African American musical expression as the source of jazz's autonomy from the culture industry was therefore one such appropriation of blackness, an interpretation that was less to do with an accurate representation of 'hot' as a musical culture as it was to do with the exploration of the listeners' own emotionality. Indeed, Frith interprets jazz connoisseurship of the 1930s as

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<sup>62</sup> Hobsbawm, *The Jazz Public*, p. 247.

<sup>63</sup> Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain*, p. 59.

<sup>64</sup> Hobsbawm noted the following club locations: London: Central London, North Middlesex, Croydon, Forest Gate, Ealing, East Ham, Barking, Richmond, Willesdon, Sutton, Walthamstow, Greenwich, Uxbridge, Edgware, Muswell Hill, Lewisham, Edmonton, South Norwood, Carshalton, Hornsey, Wembley, Woodford Green. See *The Jazz Scene*, p. 246.

<sup>65</sup> Frith, 'Playing with Real Feeling', p. 11.



a painstaking passion, a yearning for sensuous, earthy experience equated [...] with solemnly earned excitement and the ‘furtive’ release of real feeling.<sup>66</sup>

Frith’s interpretation is significant in that it contextualises ‘hot rhythm’ appreciation within a broader sense of social anxiety. Tackley adds to this the trope of ‘young men thrown into the world on their own, without guidance’ common in fiction writing of this period.<sup>67</sup> Yet enthusiasts’ curiosity was subsumed by a far more earnest approach. When the critic and jazz composer Spike Hughes organised a ‘why I like jazz’ competition in the *Melody Maker* in October 1933, the winning entry described the music as having a rounded ‘emotional, intellectual, and physical’ appeal: ‘something for the brain, something for the emotions, and sheer primitive enjoyment’.<sup>68</sup> ‘Primitive enjoyment’ with its racial undertones is incorporated within a decidedly ‘middle-brow’ – almost mundane – engagement with the music.

This unique juxtaposition can be seen in a surviving photo documenting a meeting of the Portsmouth and Southsea Rhythm Club, published in the local press in November 1934 (Fig. 1.1). A man stands before a gramophone, in front of a seated audience. Behind the assembled group is a large banner advertising ‘His Master’s Voice’ records, featuring a number of caricatured African American entertainers striking exaggerated poses. At the centre of the group there stands a 78rpm disc and a photograph of saxophonist Coleman Hawkins, arranged totem-like in front of the gramophone. At the floor below this, as well as on a table to the right of the frame, are caricatured figurines of black performers. The music that the group is about to hear is represented visually in two conflicting forms: as professional

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<sup>66</sup> Frith, ‘Playing with Real Feeling’, pp. 20-22.

<sup>67</sup> Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain*, pp. 57-59.

<sup>68</sup> ‘Mike’, “‘Mike’s” Essay Competition Result”, *Melody Maker*, 21 October 1933, p. 3.

artistry in the publicity photograph of Hawkins, but also as racially stereotyped musical excess by the figurines and background banner. Interesting, too, is the audience themselves: they sit on a spartan and mismatched assortment of wooden chairs, in a plain, featureless room. Most are young and male, but there are older figures present, as well as several women. There are few signs of significant wealth or refinement in their clothes or hairstyles. What is most surprising about this photo, then, is not that Hawkins's music is represented by images of stereotyped black performance that are anathema to his artistry, but that it is this remarkably varied audience that has assembled to listen.



Fig. 1: A meeting of the Portsmouth & Southsea Rhythm Club, c. November 1934. Reproduced with the kind permission of Michael Cooper.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Michael Cooper, 'Ron Hickman and his Band', *The Popular Portsmouth Music Scene*, <<http://www.michaelcooper.org.uk/C/hick/hickman.htm>> [accessed 17 December 2017].

Rhythm Club participation should therefore be explained not only by looking at enthusiasts' relationship to the music, but by 'hot rhythm' enthusiasts' relationship to each other, as well as the relationship between the Rhythm Club and other institutions of leisure. The impetus to listen to recordings in a group setting may be read in practical terms as much as to evidence a special affinity with recordings, for instance. During the early discussions of 'Hot Record Circles' in the *Melody Maker* during Summer 1933, a 'hot rhythm' enthusiast named G. A. R. Savage of Didsbury, Yorkshire wrote in to support the Rhythm Club concept. Savage, who would later convene the Manchester Rhythm Club No. 3, observed that:

there must be many like myself who spend their evenings listening to masterpieces of Armstrong and Ellington on a small and aged portable gramophone, thereby incurring considerable hostility from the landlady, who is endeavouring to feast her soul on 'Love's Old Sweet Song' in the kitchen. The [Hot Record] 'Circles' would be an advantage to all concerned [...] [providing] respite for landladies, and convivial evenings for 'fans'.<sup>70</sup>

Savage's observations position the 'hot rhythm' devotee at odds with an older, more conservative listener, much in the same way that written criticism distinguished 'hot rhythm' from the broader field of popular song and dance band music. At the same time, the fact that both landlady and lodger are actively listening to music at home suggests that Savage's motivations are to do with camaraderie around shared interests more than a concerted fetishisation of jazz recordings. In this way, Rhythm

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<sup>70</sup> G. A. R. Savage, '[Letter]', *Melody Maker*, 1 July 1933, p. 7. Savage's position in the Manchester Rhythm Club detailed in 'Several New Hot Record Circles', *Melody Maker*, 12 August 1933, p. 9.

Clubs can be understood as an instance of what historian Ross McKibbin has noted as ‘people of limited means forming community’.<sup>71</sup>

Listening to records was by no means the only activity that took place at Rhythm Clubs. While most scholarly attention to the Rhythm Club movement has focused on recordings, a closer look at contemporary reports shows greater diversity: clubs and club members were thoroughly integrated into the contemporary ‘live’ music scene. Rhythm Club meetings from their inception involved listening to live performances as well as those on record; the *Melody Maker*’s coverage of the founding of the No. 1 Rhythm Club reported that the club’s venue in Regent Street boasted ‘accommodation for 150, a very fine radiogram, two other good gramophones *and a piano*’.<sup>72</sup> When musicians came to perform at Rhythm Clubs, they did so under the guise of ‘distinguished guests’. The eighth meeting of the No. 1 Rhythm Club, for example, featured the ‘guest of honour’ Gerry Moore, who, according to the *Melody Maker* ‘kept the members in a state of delight for about half an hour with his ultra hot piano playing’. The paper also highlighted how, for the club’s ninth meeting, pianist and composer Reginald Forsythe had ‘kindly consented to bring his boys along to play for the club for about forty minutes’.<sup>73</sup> The patronage of notable British musicians and other industry figures, many of whom appeared as entertainers more than specialists in hot rhythm, seems to have been highly prized by Rhythm Clubs.<sup>74</sup> While Reginald Forsythe often performed and discussed records at

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<sup>71</sup> McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p. 97, as quoted in Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain*, p. 72.

<sup>72</sup> ‘Hot Record Circles Everywhere: “Melody Maker” No.1 Rhythm Club’, p. 11. My emphases.

<sup>73</sup> ‘[Rhythm Club News]’, *Melody Maker*, 11 November 1933, p. 11.

<sup>74</sup> The No. 1 Rhythm Club appointed Percy Mathison-Brooks (editor of the *Melody Maker*) and Edgar Jackson (*Gramophone* critic and record impresario) as ‘Presidents’, and musician and critic Spike Hughes and broadcaster Robert

meetings of the No. 1 Rhythm Club, members of the No. 2 Rhythm Club could be entertained by the stars. The *Melody Maker* reported that

the above circle is, on August 24, entertaining those famous radio favourites, Elsie Carlisle and Sam Browne, together with their show pianists [...] A special grand piano is being provided for them, and it seems that all attending will undoubtedly enjoy themselves.<sup>75</sup>

The following year, too, the No. 21 Ipswich Rhythm Circle held a 'well attended' meeting on 6 February 1934 where child prodigy and radio performer Cyril Hurren 'gave an entertaining show of drumming, singing and tap dancing'.<sup>76</sup>

Many Rhythm Club enthusiasts were also amateur or semi-professional musicians, involved for example in the *Melody Maker's* regional and national Dance Band Contests. In August 1933, the *Melody Maker* announced the formation of the Bradford Rhythm Club, on the initiative of Mr. N. R. Hurd, of Bolton Outlanes, Bradford.<sup>77</sup> Yet, in the classified advertisements of the same issue, Hurd could be found offering his services under the guise of 'Norman Rhodes and his Vauxhall Band', advertised as

Bradford's most popular band, established six years now under the leadership of its well-known drummer. A distinctive rhythm band composed of seven Melody Maker Contest winners.<sup>78</sup>

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Tredinnick as 'Vice-Presidents'. See 'The Hot Rhythm Club Movement', *Melody Maker*, 19 August 1933, p. 2.

<sup>75</sup> 'Stars Support Hot Rhythm Circle (No. 2)'.

<sup>76</sup> '[Rhythm Club News]', *Melody Maker*, 17 February 1934, p. 2. Likewise, the No. 18 Blackpool Rhythm Club had bandleader and impresario Jack Hylton as its president. See '[Rhythm Club News]', *Melody Maker*, 24 February 1934, p. 2.

<sup>77</sup> 'The Hot Rhythm Club Movement', *Melody Maker*, 19 August 1933, p. 2.

<sup>78</sup> '[Classified Advertisements]', *Melody Maker*, 19 August 1933, p. 14. The combination of no less than seven contest winners did not, however, help Hurd's group in the York Regional Dance Band Contest the following month, where the group was awarded fourth place. According to the contest judges, the group's foxtrot

Dance band contests were themselves evidently an attraction for Rhythm Club members; the Croydon Rhythm Club disrupted its regular fortnightly record recitals in November 1933 so as to visit ‘en bloc’ the local contest.<sup>79</sup>

To facilitate this range of activity, Rhythm Clubs were well integrated within existing leisure spaces, often inhabiting the back or upper adjoining room to a public house, hotel bar, or occasionally a rented performance space. The following table (Fig. 2) shows the venues used by a number of ‘Hot Record Circles’ and ‘Rhythm Clubs’ formed between July 1933 and November 1934:

Club	Venue
City Sale Gramophone Salon’s ‘Hot Rhythm’ Record Recitals	City Sale & Gramophone Exchange, Fleet Street, London
No. 1 Rhythm Club [London]	Anita’s School of Dancing Rooms, Swallow St., Regent Street; then Suffolk Galleries, Suffolk Street, Pall Mall; then Mecca Café, 92 High Holborn (1935)
The North Middlesex Gramophone Circle (No. 2 Rhythm Club)	The Goat Hotel, Forty Hill, Enfield
Manchester Rhythm Club (No. 3)	‘a fairly large room above a well-known public-house’ ( <i>Melody Maker</i> , 12 August 1933)
Bradford Rhythm Club	Alexandra Hotel, Bradford
Liverpool Ellington Society	Hessy’s [Musical Instrument Shop], 18-20 Manchester Street, Liverpool
Croydon Rhythm Club	a ‘room’ at 3 Park Street, Croydon
York and District Rhythm Club (No. 5)	‘a large private room’
Rhythm Club of York	Ralphia Moore’s Studios ( <i>Melody Maker</i>

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was ‘bright and ambitious with, however, several palpable faults [...] All the front line [were] too fierce and at times ragged’, while their waltz contained an ‘indifferent tenor [...] nice trumpet solo, but insipid vocal’. Their own selection, ‘Avalon’ was better received, with ‘plenty of punch and rhythm, but again no tone’; the band’s trumpeter won a special award for being ‘very good throughout, [with] great technique and good tone, style and ideas’. See ‘York Dance Band Contest’, *Melody Maker*, 16 September 1933, p. 17.

<sup>79</sup> ‘[Rhythm Club News]’, *Melody Maker*, 11 November 1933, p. 11.

	25 November 1933)
Birmingham Rhythm Club	Messrs. Scotchers [Record Shop], Corporation Street, Birmingham
Ipswich Rhythm Circle	Ballroom of the Crown and Anchor Hotel, Ipswich
Southampton Rhythm Club (No. 32)	Southwestern Hotel, Southampton

Fig. 2: Venues used by Rhythm Clubs and Hot Record Circles, 1933-1934 according to *Melody Maker* advertisements.

While club adverts provided few details of their meeting venue, those that do make clear that rooms at hotels, pubs, and cafés were common.<sup>80</sup> In nearly all cases, the venues adopted by Rhythm Clubs were already in use for musical entertainment of some form. It was already standard practice for record shops and music shops to have ‘listening booths’ or ‘audition rooms’ for individuals.<sup>81</sup> In the case of hotels, it is clear that some venues used by Rhythm Clubs were in fact larger, multi-room inns or historic coaching houses.<sup>82</sup> It is also likely that many of these venues were licensed for providing live music and dancing; similarly, many larger hotels were already multi-function entertainment spaces: the venue for the Bradford Rhythm Club, the Alexandra Hotel, housed both a restaurant and the remains of a nineteenth-

<sup>80</sup> Many Rhythm Club announcements in the *Melody Maker* provided only the address of the club’s organisers, from whom prospective members could acquire further details regarding meeting times and location.

<sup>81</sup> This is attested to by a number of record shop advertisements in the *Melody Maker*, for example those for Levy’s of Whitechapel. See ‘Levy’s’, *Melody Maker*, 24 June 1933, p. 3.

<sup>82</sup> In researching these venues I have relied on the efforts of several of amateur history websites and associations dedicated to documenting derelict and demolished pubs, cinemas, and hotels. These have provided sparse yet crucial evidence of the size and type of venue. See, for example, ‘Goat, Forty Hill, Enfield’, *UK Pub History and Historical Street Directory*, <<http://pubshistory.com/Middlesex/Enfield/GoatForty.shtml>> [accessed 15 October 2014]; and ‘Ipswich Crown & Anchor’, *Suffolk CAMRA*, <<http://www.suffolkcampa.co.uk/pubs/pub/455>> [accessed on 15 October 2014].

century music hall, all of which adjoined the town's Empire Cinema.<sup>83</sup> Only a few Rhythm Clubs appear to have used smaller, privately rented spaces, possibly due to smaller audience numbers, but the rarity of this choice is an indicator of the social and participatory value of Rhythm Club membership.<sup>84</sup> Most Rhythm Clubs chose to meet in close proximity to other forms of musical and social activity because members were likely to be involved in these activities as well as those of the Rhythm Club itself.

Historians have sought to critique British enthusiasts' dependence on recordings as the primary medium of engagement with jazz, arguing that listeners' ideas about jazz were facilitated and characterised by its decontextualisation. Yet this approach misses the vital social function that recordings and record listening themselves possess.<sup>85</sup> By focusing on the role of Rhythm Clubs and record series in British jazz appreciation, we can see the breadth of enthusiasts' engagement with the music. Jim Godbolt's description of early 'hot rhythm' collectors as 'disputative, fractious, prejudiced, pedantic and vitriolic animals' is evocative and may be representative of some of the British jazz fraternity, but it is not straightforwardly borne out by evidence of the time, which in contrast demonstrates a keen desire to

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<sup>83</sup> An anecdotal yet illuminating letter appears in the *Melody Maker*, in which the pianist Newman Smith declared that 'the pub pianist in our district has to be a skilled performer, *since the majority of public-houses are licensed concert rooms* [...] you must be able to play jazz and straight stuff, be able to transpose, read at sight, be a lyric writer and every other darned thing in the musical line' (my emphases). See 'The Confessions of a "Pub" Pianist', *Melody Maker*, 4 November 1933, p. 17. Colin Sutton, 'Bradford - Empire Cinema', *Bradford Timeline*, <<http://www.bradfordtimeline.co.uk/empire.htm>> [accessed 15 October 2014].

<sup>84</sup> For example, the No. 1 Rhythm Club moved into the Suffolk Galleries at the beginning of 1934, very soon after announcing that the club's membership numbered over a hundred.

<sup>85</sup> Tackley, 'Jazz Recordings as Social Texts', p. 168.



integrate ‘hot rhythm’ with existing local musical leisure activities, and semi-professional elements of the contemporary entertainment industry.<sup>86</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The instigation of special ‘hot rhythm’ record series, and the subsequent founding of the Rhythm Club movement marks a significant moment in British engagement with African American music. Through the increased availability of ‘hot rhythm’ on record, and through changes in listening habits, British enthusiasts began to discard overtly racist portrayals of black musical performance and to recognise artistic potential and cultural worth in what they heard. Listeners paid greater attention to soloists’ and arrangers’ musical skill, while record companies’ marketing strategies promoted their products as a permanent record of a new artistic tradition.<sup>87</sup> The ensuing debates about canonicity, authenticity, and aesthetic criteria that emerged among participants in the Rhythm Club movement are central to the continuing popular image of jazz as ‘art’. Importantly, ‘hot rhythm’ devotees largely rejected the notion that incorporating the music into established – yet implicitly Eurocentric – musical forms, ensembles, and performance contexts would increase its cultural worth. Instead, ‘hot rhythm’ was itself evidence of African Americans’ artistic accomplishments, and of the existence of an altogether new art form. Nevertheless, enthusiasts’ residual belief in ‘hot rhythm’s’ independence from the commercial entertainment economy, as well as their romanticised ideas about African Americans’ innate musicality, continued to enforce the assumption that racial difference could manifest itself musically.

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<sup>86</sup> Godbolt, *A History of Jazz in Britain 1919-50*, p. 283.

<sup>87</sup> Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain*, pp. 53, 71-72.

The extent to which Rhythm Clubs and recordings released in ‘hot rhythm’ series provided a basis for British jazz and blues appreciation during the period under investigation in this thesis cannot be overstated. Record series and albums were one of the main sources of African American jazz, blues, and swing in Britain before the adoption of the LP in the mid-1950s. A total of 846 recordings were released through Parlophone’s 37 annual series alone, from 1929 until 1957.<sup>88</sup> The popularity of these series is widely emphasised in later accounts: both bandleader Chris Barber and blues historian Paul Oliver recall the regular purchase of ‘rhythm style’ records in the 1940s, while the earliest sustained British jazz and blues scholarship from the same decade relied heavily on these records to illustrate their writings.<sup>89</sup>

But perhaps most importantly, Rhythm Clubs and ‘hot rhythm’ record series, although engaging with ideals of connoisseurship, were not exclusive institutions or media. The engagements with jazz addressed in this chapter were commonplace, not exceptional; the availability of these records made them appealing for enthusiasts, critics, and later scholars who sought to document jazz and blues’s origins and development. Furthermore, in contrast to the United States where specialist interest in ‘hot’ jazz was confined to the metropolitan centres of the east coast, ‘hot rhythm’ appreciation in Britain was a national – albeit niche – (sub)urban pastime. Indeed, the strength of British interest in ‘hot rhythm’ problematises convenient, American-centric narratives of the development of jazz appreciation. While jazz’s most

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<sup>88</sup> Phillips, ‘Parlophone’s New “Rhythm-Style” Series’, p. 15.

<sup>89</sup> Chris Barber, with Alyn Shipton, *Jazz Me Blues: The Autobiography of Chris Barber* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2014), pp. 6-8; Christian O’Connell, ‘The British ‘Bluesman’: Paul Oliver and the Nature of Transatlantic Blues Scholarship’, (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Gloucestershire, 2013), p. 302. Iain Lang’s 1943 pamphlet *Background of the Blues*, for example, is peppered with references to records from 1930s record series, and contains a discography of recommended listening that draws almost exclusively from these lists.

important musical progenitors have been (African) American, debates about their music's meaning and value have played out over a much wider geographical area.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Producer John Hammond would later recall: 'It's quite amazing how much England fashions American tastes in music. In 1931, when no jazz was being recorded in [the United States], the three biggest labels in England all had very active jazz series of the great American jazz artists, both Black and White. They were just screaming for more products, and nobody would give it to them.' See John Hammond, 'An Experiment in Jazz History', in *Black Music in Our Culture: Curricular Ideas on the Subjects, Materials and Problems*, ed. Dominique-Rene de Lerma (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1970), p. 49, quoted in Raeburn, *New Orleans Style*, p. 106.

## II. 'South London Blues': George Webb's Dixielanders and the New Orleans 'Revival' in 1940s London

Wartime readers of the *Melody Maker* might have easily missed a telling detail about the paper's amateur dance band contest in June 1944: third prize had been awarded to a 'genuine old-time Dixieland-style group' consisting of a clarinet, trumpet, trombone, piano, guitar, and drums. Judges were delighted that the band had demonstrated a 'quite astonishing understanding' of early jazz, and conferred a special award for 'best small band' and honorary mentions for the clarinet and trombone. Yet the band's path to top prize was checked by what the judges described as a 'lack of the finer points of musicianship': 'faulty intonation [...] bad balance [...] and foot stamping'.<sup>1</sup>

This was George Webb's Dixielanders, now widely credited as Britain's first 'New Orleans style' jazz band.<sup>2</sup> The group had formed in 1943 at the Bexleyheath Rhythm Club, of which Webb was a founding member, in the South London suburb of Barnehurst. Cutting their teeth at local functions, amateur band contests, and Rhythm Club meetings around London and the South East, the Dixielanders were renowned for their loud, enthusiastic, and often shambolic interpretations of early jazz, gaining an avid following among local enthusiasts. The high point of the band's career came in 1946 with the foundation of their own regular club, the Hot Club of London. Although the group disbanded barely two years later, the Dixielanders were by this time regarded as the lynchpin of a thriving 'traditional jazz' scene. Their adoption of New Orleans jazz was inspired by a growing 'revival' movement that

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<sup>1</sup> 'Peckham Pandemonium', *Melody Maker*, 3 June 1944, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Hilary Moore, *Inside British Jazz: Crossing Borders of Race, Nation and Class* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 39; David Gelly, *An Unholy Row: Jazz in Britain and its Audience, 1945-1960* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2014), pp. 20-24.

had emerged in the United States during the late 1930s. Critics and collectors began to pay greater attention to jazz's origins and development as an 'urban folk music' of African American origin, identifying recordings made by musicians active in New Orleans and Chicago during the 1920s as representative of jazz's earliest and most fundamental musical characteristics. The 'collective' improvisation and 'hot' performance style demonstrated on these discs became, to revivalists' ears, synonymous with unfettered creative expression, in stark contrast to the formality of contemporary swing and dance band music that dominated popular taste.

But how did a fascination with New Orleans jazz, filtered through the writings of bookish American record collectors, take hold among a group of amateur musicians in a suburb of London during World War Two? Jazz historians are fond of this incongruity. In his history of jazz in Britain, the Dixielanders' manager turned historian Jim Godbolt juxtaposes the dreary, 'subtopian' housing estates of wartime Barnehurst and the riverboats, sporting houses, and gambling dens of the Crescent City. The contrast highlights British jazz fans' fascination with 'the exciting music of another race and another generation'.<sup>3</sup> Godbolt's observation foreshadows more recent critiques of jazz revivalism: that white enthusiasm for New Orleans jazz fetishises a mythic African American expressivity, drawing on earlier primitivist stereotypes. Moreover, revivalists' rehabilitation of early jazz inevitably sanitised a complex and politically potent expressive tradition; devotion to New Orleans jazz became a 'posture' that served as a muted rebellion against white, middle class social norms.<sup>4</sup> These assessments are undeniably powerful and well made, but I believe that they capture only one facet of revivalism. The New Orleans revival is

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<sup>3</sup> Jim Godbolt, *A History of Jazz in Britain, 1950-70* (London: Quartet Books, 1989), pp. 2-4.

<sup>4</sup> Simon Frith 'Playing with Real Feeling: Making Sense of Jazz in Britain', *new formations*, 4 (1988), 7-24, p. 20.

typically understood as the work, above all, of a small army of record collectors, discographers, and critics whose investment in the idea of ‘authentic’ jazz was articulated, as Bernard Gendron has observed, through a series of ‘discursive formations’ audible in ‘talk and patter, in magazines, books and radio shows’.<sup>5</sup> But with their performances and popularity, the Dixielanders sit uncomfortably alongside the ‘mouldy fig’ record collector or critic, many of whom were ambivalent – if not overtly hostile – towards white jazz performers.

In this chapter, I argue that the activities of George Webb’s Dixielanders and their position in the history of British jazz offer an opportunity to reassess New Orleans revivalism’s motivations and manifestations. I focus in particular on the idea of music revivals as potentially transformative, as Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill have identified, and of the jazz revival in particular as an ‘imaginative forum’ in which enthusiasts could navigate wartime and early postwar Britain.<sup>6</sup> After surveying the broad tenets of New Orleans revivalism as represented in texts and recordings circulating on both sides of the Atlantic, I examine the extent to which the Dixielanders adopted these ideas and were thus understood as pioneers of the movement during the mid-1940s. Drawing on oral histories of band members, as well as contemporary news reports, and items held in Webb’s personal collection at the National Jazz Archive, I provide an alternative reading of the band’s relationship to New Orleans revivalism. Finally, I consider how the Dixielanders may compel us to modify our broader understanding of jazz revivalism as a cultural phenomenon.

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<sup>5</sup> Bernard Gendron, ‘Moldy Figs and Modernists: Jazz at War (1942-1946)’, *Discourse*, 15.3 (Spring 1993), 130-157, pp. 132-133.

<sup>6</sup> Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill, ‘An Introduction to Music Revival as Concept, Cultural Process and Medium of Change’, *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival*, ed. by Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 3-42 (pp. 3-4). George McKay, *Circular Breathing: The Cultural Politics of Jazz in Britain* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2005), p. 50. ‘Imaginative forum’ is a term introduced in Moore, *Inside British Jazz*, p. 54.

## Revivalist Criticism in Transatlantic Circulation

### *The roots of the New Orleans revival*

The New Orleans revival emerged among American ‘hot’ record collectors during the 1930s, especially in the urban northeast of the United States. American critical writings divided jazz into two categories: ‘hot’ and ‘sweet’. ‘Hot’ jazz was a style of small-ensemble jazz performance, emphasising solo improvisation, rhythmic vitality, and blues-based tonality and melody. Writers such as the critic and record collector Charles Edward Smith asserted that the ‘hot’ style epitomised jazz expression, drawing on a uniquely American ‘folk’ character that ‘affirms life, [and] exults in the simple, emotional joys of being’.<sup>7</sup> These characteristics, Smith argued, stood in sharp contrast to ‘sweet’ music’s ‘straight’ approach to melodic phrasing, and its preference for written arrangements over improvised solos. Importantly, ‘hot’ criticism of the early 1930s did not relate jazz’s ‘authentic’ essence to New Orleans, or specifically to the work of African American performers. Jazz scholar Bruce Boyd Raeburn highlights how frequently Smith’s writings examined recordings by white jazz performers such as Leon Rappolo, Elmer Schoebel, Hoagy Carmichael, and Red Nichols.<sup>8</sup> By focusing chiefly on improvisation as a manifestation of unmediated expression and a fundamental component of jazz, Smith displayed limited concern

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Edward Smith, ‘Jazz: Some Little Known Aspects’, *Symposium: A Critical Review*, October 1930, pp. 502-517 (p. 514); quoted in Bruce Boyd Raeburn, *New Orleans Style and the Writing of American Jazz History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), p. 26.

<sup>8</sup> Raeburn, *New Orleans Style*, pp. 26-27. Although both Rappolo and Schoebel had connections to New Orleans, others like Carmichael and Nichols had emerged from other musical centres including New York and the midwestern cities.

with how jazz had developed within particular communities or socio-cultural contexts.<sup>9</sup>

During the second half of the 1930s, however, Smith's 'hot' criticism began to place a greater emphasis on the regional origins of jazz and to make finer distinctions between 'white' and 'black' musical responses to this environment. The idea that jazz was 'born' in New Orleans had captured the popular imagination as early as 1917, when the Original Dixieland Jazz Band (ODJB), which hailed from the Crescent City, publicised their recording debut by claiming that they had invented jazz.<sup>10</sup> While Smith had initially written favourably of the ODJB, by the late 1930s he offered a considerably more muted assessment of the group's role in the jazz history. Rather than attribute jazz's origin to a single ensemble like the ODJB, Smith argued that jazz was 'an outgrowth of the urbanization of folk music', and that 'the predecessors of the [ODJB] were the street bands of urban America', who had fused hymns and European folk ballads with African American blues, spirituals, and work songs. Perhaps most importantly, Smith distinguished the ODJB's '[assimilation of] breakdown, military and ragtime themes...cadenzas and importunate novelty effects' from the activities of a non-white New Orleans group, King Oliver's Creole Band, who had '[taken] over the nostalgic blues themes' to develop a 'close-knit counterpoint' that was 'distinguished by overlapping patterns and a rolling, rocking rhythm'.<sup>11</sup> These divergent responses to the early cultural

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<sup>9</sup> Raeburn argues that it was instead in European jazz writing, in particular that of the French discographer Charles Delaunay and critic Hugues Panassié, that a more fervent emphasis on African Americans' contributions to early jazz could be found. However, it is important to note that in both of these cases jazz's link to African American expressive culture was cast as innate, primitive musicality. See Raeburn, *New Orleans Style*, pp. 47-49.

<sup>10</sup> Raeburn, *New Orleans Style*, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Edward Smith, 'Swing', *New Republic*, 16 February 1938, pp. 39-41; 'Heat Wave', *Stage*, September 1935, pp. 45-46; both quoted in Raeburn, *New*



environment of New Orleans, delineated by race, would become central to ‘revivalist’ thought.<sup>12</sup>

A seminal revivalist text is the 1939 book *Jazzmen*, written by a group of American ‘hot’ record collectors and amateur researchers including Frederic Ramsey Jr., Charles Edward Smith, William Russell, and Stephen W. Smith. ‘Authentic’ jazz, the authors contend, bears the indelible hallmark of New Orleans’s unique cultural environment – its bars, taverns, and sporting houses – as well as the city’s community rituals like carnivals, funeral processions, and civic picnics. Furthermore, *Jazzmen* solidifies what Bruce Raeburn has termed a ‘diffusionist narrative’ in jazz history. ‘New Orleans jazz’, William Russell and Stephen Smith write, ‘spread fan-like up the Mississippi Valley, from coast to coast, and throughout the world.’<sup>13</sup> Central to *Jazzmen* is an extended network of musicians, all of whom were at some point based in New Orleans or directly influenced by the city’s music. The closure of Storyville (the city’s red light district), combined with the broader context of the Great Migration, meant that New Orleans musicians too moved north, settling in

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*Orleans Style*, pp. 54-55. Interestingly, Smith’s article ‘The New Orleans Horn’, which contains many of the same ideas and phrases, was published in the British magazine *Swing Music* in March 1936. See Charles Edward Smith, ‘That New Orleans Horn’, *Swing Music*, March 1936, pp. 11-13, 29.

<sup>12</sup> Any discussion of jazz in New Orleans should properly take account of the role played by the Creole community within the city’s cultural and social life. As David Ake has identified, however, revivalist jazz historiography has tended to downplay Creole contributions to jazz, subsuming them – as had been the case under ‘one drop rule’ segregation laws of the later nineteenth and bulk of the twentieth century – within a broader dichotomy of ‘white’ and ‘Negro’ performance cultures. While revivalist writers would recognise the heritage of individual Creole musicians such as Sidney Bechet or Jelly Roll Morton, and comment on the existence of the Creole community as evidence of New Orleans’s unique multi-ethnic milieu, ‘Creole’ identity became synonymous with ‘New Orleans native’ in many accounts, and consequently part of a monolithic account of jazz’s essentially ‘Negro’ character. See David Ake, “‘Blue Horizon’: Creole Culture and Early New Orleans Jazz”, in *Jazz Cultures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 10-41.

<sup>13</sup> William Russell and Stephen W. Smith, ‘New Orleans Music’, in *Jazzmen*, ed. by Frederic Ramsey, Jr. and Charles Edward Smith (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939), pp. 7-38 (p. 36).

Chicago and other major cities of the midwest. Drawing on extensive research in New Orleans and among the city's older musicians, in particular cornetist Bunk Johnson and trombonist Willie Cornish, *Jazzmen*'s authors mythologise not only the city's unique cultural milieu at the turn of the century, but also the activities of many prominent musicians. At the head of this group was the legendary cornetist Buddy Bolden, a larger-than-life figure whose playing 'on still nights [...] could be heard for miles, from the river back to Lake Pontchartrain'.<sup>14</sup>

For the authors of *Jazzmen*, New Orleans jazz is a fundamentally modern tradition, an 'urban folk music' shaped by the circumstances experienced by its creators at the turn of the century. As Russell and Smith hypothesise:

The young New Orleans aspirant, having no teacher to show him the supposed limitations of his instrument, went ahead by himself and frequently hit upon new paths and opened up undreamed-of possibilities [...] the freedom of the New Orleans musician from any restraining tradition and supervision enabled him to develop [...] not only new technical resources but an appropriate and unique jazz style.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, the basis of this style is an approach to performance perceived as fundamentally African American:

With the New Orleans Negro, improvisation was an essential part of musical skill [...] In all cultures except that of Europe, where for a century improvisation has been a lost art, creative performance is a requisite. Thus, where there was no premium on exact repetition and hide-bound imitation, only those with the urge to express themselves and an innate power of invention took up music [...] The fact that these men were not primarily note

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<sup>14</sup> Russell, 'New Orleans Music', p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> Russell, 'New Orleans Music', p. 30.

readers also explains, when collective improvisation was attempted, the origin of the characteristic New Orleans polyphony.<sup>16</sup>

The ideas put forward by Ramsey, Smith, and others in *Jazzmen* represent more than a story of jazz's early development; they effectively stake out the African American musical culture of turn-of-the-century New Orleans as the 'ur-style' from which all subsequent jazz derives, and back up this narrative persuasively with first-hand testimony of musicians who were present.<sup>17</sup> Subsequent chapters focus on later developments of jazz: a lineage of white New Orleans musicians that includes the Original Dixieland Jazz Band and the New Orleans Rhythm Kings; a younger generation of 'Chicago' style players including cornetist Bix Beiderbecke, Eddie Condon, Bud Freeman, Frank Teschemaker, Pee Wee Russell, and Muggsy Spanier; blues singers like Mamie and Bessie Smith and songwriters like Clarence Williams; boogie-woogie piano players such as Jimmy Yancey, Meade Lux Lewis, and Albert Ammons; and the contemporary big bands and swing stars of 1930s New York. What unites these multiple schools is the authors' commitment to what jazz scholar John Gennari has termed a 'new national mythology': jazz, and therefore American popular culture at large, was rooted in the culture and experience of African Americans. This subaltern, 'trickle up' epic narrative inverts established hierarchies of 'high' and 'low' culture.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, while Charles Edward Smith had previously viewed white 'Dixieland' bands like the ODJB as one particular response to folk music's urbanisation, he argues in *Jazzmen* that they and other white musicians were only introduced to 'improvised music [...] through the influence of uptown Negroes', thereby establishing African American expressive culture as the root of

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<sup>16</sup> Russell, 'New Orleans Music', p. 30.

<sup>17</sup> John Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and its Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 124-125.

<sup>18</sup> Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool*, pp. 121-129.

jazz.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, *Jazzmen*'s authors express a shared dissatisfaction with their own historical moment. Gennari interprets their depiction of an idyllic yet fading musical culture in *Jazzmen* as part of a quest for national renewal in the context of the Great Depression.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the narrative tropes that abound in *Jazzmen* reveal their authors' distrust of modernisation and commercialisation, a common feature of 'revival' movements.<sup>21</sup> While New Orleans is described as the birthplace of jazz's spirit and optimism, New York, Gennari observes, emerges as a 'site of tragedy' where heroic musicians are led astray by commerce, and where the 'pressure-cooker conditions' of the entertainment industry impedes 'authentic' jazz.<sup>22</sup>

#### *From Criticism to Advocacy*

The publication of *Jazzmen* intensified interest in jazz's origins leading to a concerted effort to preserve, and where possible resurrect, early New Orleans-style jazz during the early 1940s. Well-placed critics like Ramsey, Smith, and Russell, as well as John Hammond, Hugues Panassié, and George Avakian were able to convince major record labels to reissue old recordings or to sponsor new ones. RCA Victor recorded pianist Jelly Roll Morton at Ramsey's behest in 1939, while Decca released the album *New Orleans Jazz* in 1940, featuring new recordings by Louis Armstrong, Henry 'Red' Allen, Zutty Singleton, Johnny Dodds, and Jimmy Noone,

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<sup>19</sup> Charles Edward Smith, 'White New Orleans', in *Jazzmen*, ed. by Frederic Ramsey, Jr. and Charles Edward Smith (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939), pp. 39-58 (p. 40). See also Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool*, pp. 129-130.

<sup>20</sup> Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool*, pp. 122-123; Raeburn, *New Orleans Style*, p. 79.

<sup>21</sup> Bithell and Hill, 'An Introduction to Music Revival', p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool*, pp. 129, 127.

with liner notes by Smith.<sup>23</sup> When large companies could not be persuaded of these projects' commercial viability, a number of newly formed independent labels, including Jazz Information, Delta, Jazz Man, and Circle, stood ready to fill the gap.

Furthermore, revivalism quickly entered what Richard Ekins has termed a 'reconstructionist phase', in which critics, collectors, and enthusiasts followed up leads in *Jazzmen* to identify additional, contemporary musicians who could serve as living links to jazz's past.<sup>24</sup> As Raeburn observes, likewise, 'the essentially passive role of the collector-turned-historian now took on new meaning, bordering on social activism.'<sup>25</sup> The rediscovery of veterans like Bunk Johnson and Willie Cornish by Ramsey and Russell opened up the prospect that early New Orleans-style could still be heard if other such musicians were located.<sup>26</sup> Critics devoted increasing attention to musicians who possessed a privileged understanding of the New Orleans style according to a bundle of essentialist criteria; veterans who had not participated in the northward migration or pursued professional advancement were particularly valued.

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<sup>23</sup> Raeburn, *New Orleans Style*, pp. 101-110. *New Orleans Jazz* (Decca A-144, 1940). Although Panassié's presence in this lineup is somewhat unexpected, he organised a recording session built around an idealised 'New Orleans style' ensemble, including Mezz Mezzrow, Tommy Ladnier, and Sidney Bechet, while visiting the US in 1938. These recordings, Raeburn argues, 'laid the groundwork for Morton's record dates [...] [and represented] the first example of a recording session strategically underwritten with the idea of instigating a New Orleans revival.' See Raeburn, *New Orleans Style*, p. 101.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Ekins, 'Authenticity as Authenticating – the Case of New Orleans Jazz Revivalism: An Approach from Grounded Theory and Social World Analysis', *Popular Music History*, 7.1 (2012), 24-52, p. 33-35.

<sup>25</sup> Raeburn, *New Orleans Style*, p. 80.

<sup>26</sup> Raeburn, *New Orleans Style*, pp. 80-82. It is also worth noting the overlap between the activities of revivalist writers like Ramsey and Smith with contemporary folklore research. Both disciplines began to place an increased emphasis on oral history as a legitimate historical source, and at the same time that jazz writers began to explore jazz's folk roots more deeply, folklorists softened their stance towards jazz. Crucial here is the interaction between Charles Edward Smith, John Hammond, and Alan Lomax; the latter recorded a lengthy oral history of the New Orleans jazz pianist Jelly Roll Morton in 1938. See Raeburn, *New Orleans Style*, pp. 88-91; John Szwed, *The Man Who Recorded the World: A Biography of Alan Lomax* (London: Arrow Books, 2010), pp. 122-126.

These musicians' perceived centrality to the formation of jazz, combined with their apparent isolation from subsequent musical developments, provided revivalists with a tantalising glimpse into jazz's pre-history. It was one, however, that was inevitably mediated by critics' preconceptions of 'authentic' New Orleans style as well as musicians' own ideas of how they wanted to play. Attention to Bunk Johnson is a case in point: Johnson – ageing, toothless, and without an instrument – epitomised the forgotten tradition. Sessions arranged for him and other New Orleans musicians, on a Presto portable recorder in a makeshift studio, elicited crude yet exciting results that encouraged critics' belief in their own diagnosis of a neglected yet still visceral New Orleans style. Yet it is clear that a key element of Johnson's uneven tone and reserved improvisatory choices derived from the trumpeter's failing lip and lack of practice. In addition, revivalists' championing of Johnson and others as bastions of the tradition glossed over these musicians' career aspirations and musical preferences, as Raeburn points out. While Johnson was lionised as a 'source' musician of the emerging New Orleans revival, his position as a fount of knowledge was held in check by the institutional and social authority possessed by his new – and overwhelmingly white – audiences and promoters.<sup>27</sup>

In tandem with the rediscovery of veteran players, other musicians began to adopt the central tenets of the New Orleans style. Among these musicians was the San Francisco-based Yerba Buena Jazz Band led by cornettist Lu Watters, who first recorded for the Jazz Man label in 1941. Watters's group was modelled closely on the recordings of King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band, including the distinctive two-trumpet lead of Oliver and Louis Armstrong. Another notable revival band was that led by trombonist Kid Ory, a Louisiana native who had played with Armstrong and

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<sup>27</sup> Raeburn, *New Orleans Style*, pp. 114, 134.

Oliver in New Orleans before moving to California in 1919. Although he had retired from professional performance by 1933, Ory reinstated his old band in 1942 and broadcast regularly on the West Coast as a quintessential New Orleans jazz group.<sup>28</sup>

The ‘reconstructionist’ phase of the revival saw critics’ and enthusiasts’ advocacy harden into ideology. Revivalists adopted an anti-commercial mindset, pitting their music against the entertainment industry and its chief musical output, swing. While praising ‘hot tone’ and ‘collective improvisation’ in the music they favoured, revivalists generated a vocabulary of excess for discussing swing. A music of meaningless virtuosity and tiresome repetition, swing was characterised by its ubiquity on the airwaves and by the slavish, unthinking devotion from its fans. This stood in contrast to the ostensibly measured connoisseurship of ‘hot’ collectors and enthusiasts of the New Orleans style.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, revivalist criticism began to fetishise black musicality, in ways not seen so overtly since the early 1930s. While critics like Charles Edward Smith writing in the 1930s and early 1940s had retained a generously ecumenical stance towards the racial origins of New Orleans jazz, some writers disavowed even basic technical competency among white performers, and particularly neophyte revivalists. In his 1943 pamphlet *This is Jazz*, critic and radio broadcaster Rudi Blesh outlines the essential characteristics of ‘real jazz’: small, 5-8 piece ensembles playing collective improvisation, with no ‘popular tunes’, ‘pure tone’, or ‘symphonic instrumentation’. Moreover, Blesh defined jazz as a product of the ‘American Negro’, its fundamental characteristics such as rhythm and

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<sup>28</sup> Raeburn, *New Orleans Style*, pp. 127-129.

<sup>29</sup> Gendron, ‘Moldy Figs and Modernists’, p. 143-146.

improvisation having their roots in black – and ultimately *African* – musical ritual.<sup>30</sup>

‘Jazz is...a language,’ he explained,

basically Negroid with some grafted characteristics, but with its own  
untranslatable idioms [...] [and] lays its emphasis, like all Negro activity, on  
the complete and direct expression of simple human emotions.<sup>31</sup>

Unlike the authors of *Jazzmen*, Blesh drew boundaries around African American and European musics to elucidate jazz’s essential ‘difference’; this move in effect reintroduced the primitivist flavour found in writings over a decade earlier. As for the Dixieland style, Blesh was emphatic, stating ‘white men cannot [...] play [jazz]’.<sup>32</sup>

#### *The New Orleans revival in Britain*

The emergence of a revivalist approach to jazz in Britain was roughly contemporaneous with its development in the United States. Rhythm Club-affiliated magazines in the UK like *Hot News* and *Swing Music* catered for the ‘hot’ devotee’s interest in the ensembles of Fletcher Henderson and Duke Ellington, as well as in the smaller, white groups that had been active in New York and Chicago during the early 20s. These magazines also provided space for early attempts at telling the story of jazz’s origins, development, and international dissemination on record; they published writings by American critics and musicians in addition to those by aspiring British writers. During 1935 and 1936, critic and Rhythm Club founder Eric Ballard provided readers of both periodicals with a year-by-year survey of American

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<sup>30</sup> Rudi Blesh, *This is Jazz: A Series of Lectures given at the San Francisco Museum of Art* (San Francisco: the author; repr. London: Jazz Music Books, 1943), pp. 6-7, 31-33.

<sup>31</sup> Blesh, *This is Jazz*, p. 22.

<sup>32</sup> Blesh, *This is Jazz*, p. 31.



and British releases since 1917 entitled ‘Dixieland to the Duke’. Although his survey was effectively a selected discography written out in prose, his framing of each instalment with titles like ‘the end of the pioneer period’ (late 1923) and ‘the dawn of the golden era’ (1927) hints at a narrative of jazz’s development, albeit one that centred on white musicians like Red Nichols and Bix Beiderbecke.<sup>33</sup>

The fact that jazz had originated in New Orleans was a foregone conclusion in the minds of most British ‘hot’ devotees, not least since this narrative had been emphasised by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band during their visit to Britain in 1919.<sup>34</sup> More specifically, ‘hot’ enthusiasts’ knowledge of musicians’ lives meant that biographical or professional connections to New Orleans were frequently noted, even if the main focus of an article was on their subsequent professional activities in Chicago or New York. Jeff Aldam’s 1935 article on Luis Russell, for instance, observed that the Panama-born bandleader had ‘found his way to Harlem via the usual route – New Orleans, Chicago, New York’ and that this journey had brought him into contact with some ‘very excellent players’, including Henry ‘Red’ Allen, Albert Nichols, Paul Barbarin, Pop [sic] Foster, and Charlie Holmes. Apart from Holmes, all of these musicians had begun their professional careers in New Orleans in the 1900s and 1910s, but had moved to Chicago, St. Louis, or New York between 1917 and the late 1920s.<sup>35</sup> This biographical approach effectively pre-empted the detailed coverage of New Orleans-based musical networks later witnessed in

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<sup>33</sup> Eric Ballard, ‘Dixieland to the Duke – Part 6’, *Hot News*, April 1935, pp. 5, 7; ‘Dixieland to the Duke – Part 9’, *Hot News*, July 1935, pp. 3-4. Ballard’s survey had actually begun in the magazine *Ballroom and Band* in 1934, which folded after five issues. *Hot News*, which was edited by Ballard, published instalments 6-11 of Ballard’s survey, before this magazine also folded in late 1935. Although two further instalments were later published in *Swing Music* in Autumn 1936, this magazine too came to an abrupt end. It is unclear whether Ballard’s survey was ever completed.

<sup>34</sup> Catherine Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain, 1880-1935* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 124, 136-138.

<sup>35</sup> Jeff Aldam, ‘Boss of the Stomps’, *Hot Music*, May 1935, pp. 20-21 (p. 20).

*Jazzmen*. Nevertheless, the shift towards examining New Orleans jazz in terms of its social and cultural context and emphasising the music's African American origins took time. A 1935 *Hot News* article by African American trombonist Preston Jackson recalls his acquaintance with King Oliver, drawing attention to the cornettist's influential role in early jazz and in particular on 'the La Rocca boys of the Dixieland Jazz Band'. Yet this was followed two months later by an interview and profile of Wingy Manone by American critic Marshall Stearns in which Manone asserts that, in turn-of-the-century New Orleans, 'it was the whites who played jazz'.<sup>36</sup>

The onset of the Second World War did not seriously inhibit the transmission of American jazz writing. *Jazzmen* was published in Britain in 1940, and its focus on the lives of Armstrong, Oliver and other African American musicians and its reinterpretation of white performers as imitators soon caught the interest of the musical press. The *Melody Maker*'s long time 'hot' critic 'Mike' (Spike Hughes) praised *Jazzmen*'s evocative setting and basis in musicians' testimonies, but thought it would be controversial given its marginalisation of pioneering white musicians 'who washed jazz's face and made an honest woman of her'.<sup>37</sup> One of the first articles clearly to adopt revivalist vocabulary came from the Rhythm Club stalwart James Holloway, who commented on the 'essential jazz truth' of what he termed 'pre-Golden age' jazz. Holloway argued that the music of 'New Orleans men' like Armstrong, Morton, [Omer] Simeon, Oliver, Bechet, and Johnny Dodds was 'completely unforced and natural', and displayed 'virility, not a tense, mannered

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<sup>36</sup> Preston Jackson, 'King Oliver: Daddy of the Trumpet', *Hot News*, May 1935, pp. 5, 19 (p. 5); Marshall Stearns, 'Wingy Manone: The Spirit of New Orleans', *Hot News*, July 1935, pp. 5-6 (p. 6).

<sup>37</sup> Spike Hughes, "'Jazz Men": The Story of Jazz Told in the Lives of the Men Who Created It', *Melody Maker*, 27 January 1940, p. 4.

vitality'. Echoing Hughes's comments on *Jazzmen*, Holloway declared that jazz 'was "groomed" not in the magnificent New York hotels and clubs, but in the bawdy barrel-houses of Storyville'; he predicted a downturn in the popularity of white 'hot' performers like Joe Venuti, Red Nichols, and Miff Mole in favour of 'their coloured contemporaries':

At a time when we are getting sated with swing in the modern or any manner you like, it is to the veterans of that New Orleans heyday twenty years back that we are turning at last.<sup>38</sup>

The seminal British revivalist text was arguably the essay 'Background of the Blues', written by *Times* correspondent and jazz enthusiast Iain Lang. First appearing in *The Saturday Book* in 1942,<sup>39</sup> Lang's essay drew heavily on *Jazzmen*: it guides readers on a tour through the saloons, barbershops, and brothels of New Orleans, drawing an evocative portrait of a city where people danced – rather than walked – about the streets.<sup>40</sup> Lang adopted an anti-commercial posture that distinguished 'true' jazz from its 'industrial' counterpart, swing, which Lang described as

a complicated vested interest on which depend the fortunes [...] of music-publishers, song-manufacturers, dance-band leaders and their employees.<sup>41</sup>

For Lang, jazz's popularity had become its undoing: the music's national spread had exposed it to an entertainment industry whose profiteering threatened the 'true' spirit of New Orleans and Chicago jazz. New Orleans's most valuable cultural creation

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<sup>38</sup> James Holloway, 'The Stuff of Real Jazz', *Melody Maker*, 28 September 1940, p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> Lang's essay was later expanded into a pamphlet for the Workers' Music Association in 1943, and a book entitled *Jazz in Perspective* in 1947.

<sup>40</sup> Iain Lang, 'Background of the Blues', *The Saturday Book, 1941-42: A New Miscellany*, ed. by Leonard Russell (London: Hutchinson, 1942), pp. 330-357 (p. 331).

<sup>41</sup> Lang, 'Background of the Blues', p. 330.

was at risk of being ‘sold [...] up the river’ by musicians hungry for fame and fortune.<sup>42</sup> Although Lang’s avowedly leftwing politics led him to the tendentious observation that jazz was ‘not the music of a race [...] but of a class – of a proletariat which is both black and white’, his examples make clear that ‘authentic’ jazz was personified first and foremost by African American performers like Armstrong and Oliver, blues singer Bessie Smith, and pianist Jimmy Yancey.<sup>43</sup> Lang ignored white ‘Dixieland’ musicians entirely, and clearly misunderstood the role of Creole musicians. Noting in his 1942 essay the preponderance of French names among New Orleans jazz musicians, he explained incorrectly that ‘they are those of Negroes [...] descendants of slaves owned by French-Louisianians [sic] who adopted their owners’ names.’<sup>44</sup>

Revivalist perspectives gradually spread throughout the British jazz scene, adopted by critics and record recitalists active in the Rhythm Clubs. Inspired by the critical writings of American revivalists, which were the primary means through which British enthusiasts learnt about New Orleans jazz, a number of specialist periodicals appeared in the early 1940s. *Jazz Music*, published in London by the newly formed Jazz Sociological Society under the directorship of Max Jones and Albert McCarthy, appeared in 1943 ‘with a view to investigating and surveying the New Orleans origins of jazz, the history of it, and its place in society.’<sup>45</sup> A counterpart was the Nottingham-based Jazz Appreciation Society, directed by James Asman and Bill Kinnell, which likewise published a journal and a series of pamphlets. Numerous smaller regional organisations, which were often associated

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<sup>42</sup> Lang, ‘Background of the Blues’, p. 337.

<sup>43</sup> Iain Lang, *Background of the Blues* (London: Workers’ Music Association, 1943), p. 12.

<sup>44</sup> Lang, ‘Background of the Blues’, p. 338.

<sup>45</sup> Albert McCarthy, ‘Editorial’, *Jazz Music* 1.1-3 (London: Jazz Sociological Society, repr. 1943), 1-2.

with one or more local Rhythm Clubs, also published for varying periods of time. Yet while writing about New Orleans, its stylistic precepts, and its musicians had become common in Britain by 1943, not many recordings were available. For instance, enough was known about Jelly Roll Morton by Spring 1944 to devote an issue of *Jazz Music* to his life, recordings, and status as a pioneering New Orleans pianist; however, Albert McCarthy's discography could only muster nine discs of Morton's music on the British HMV label: two discs released in late 1926, a one-off 'special list' side from 1931, and a six-disc album issued in 1941 to commemorate Morton's death.<sup>46</sup> Unsurprisingly, recent recordings of Bunk Johnson, Lu Watters, or Kid Rena for private labels like Jazz Man and Delta had no means of transatlantic distribution and were only obtained by a small number of critics and collectors. One means of hearing some of these records was the BBC's *Radio Rhythm Club*, a weekly programme modelled on the Rhythm Club movement that was broadcast weekly on the Forces Programme from June 1940 onwards. Overseen by jazz collector and BBC Gramophone Library assistant Charles Chilton, *Radio Rhythm Club* hosted record recitals by Chilton himself or by guest recitalists. Several of these programmes featured recordings of New Orleans (or New Orleans-inspired) performers, including Lu Watters, King Oliver, Sidney Bechet, Jelly Roll Morton, and Henry 'Red' Allen.<sup>47</sup>

The New Orleans revival thus developed in a similar fashion in Britain to in the United States. Ideas about the origins, development, and canonic performers of

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<sup>46</sup> Albert McCarthy, 'Jelly Roll Morton Discography', *Jazz Music*, 2.6-7 (February-March 1944), 102-106. See also Brian Rust, 'Jelly Roll Blues', *Pickup*, 1.7 (July 1946), 2-3. These discs were HMV B5164, B5212, B4837, and B9216-B9221.

<sup>47</sup> A tribute to Jelly Roll Morton was given on the *Radio Rhythm Club* in November 1941, some months after Morton's death. The recital was given by Rhythm Club founder Bill Elliott, suggesting that Elliott was in possession of some of Morton's recordings that were otherwise inaccessible to British jazz fans. See 'Radio Rhythm Club', BBC Forces Programme, 26 November 1941.

‘authentic’ jazz derived from critical writings from across the Atlantic. However, the ‘reconstructionist’ phase of the revival in Britain was held back by the lack of availability of recordings by rediscovered musicians like Bunk Johnson, or by revivalist groups such as the Lu Watters band. Although they were often discussed in British magazines, aural evidence of these groups would not be widely available in Britain until the late 1940s. Even then, most enthusiasts’ exposure to New Orleans jazz came via major labels – HMV released its first Bunk Johnson disc in early 1947 – rather than imports on independent labels like Jazz Man.<sup>48</sup> The idea of ‘New Orleans jazz’ existed in the early to mid 1940s in jazz enthusiasts’ minds in much the way that it had been set out in *Jazzmen*: as a geographical, cultural, and social point of origin for a wider national – and multiracial – tradition. In the following section, I return to the band regarded as the first to ‘adopt’ New Orleans-style jazz, George Webb’s Dixielanders, examining their career as part of a broader revival movement.

### **‘Jazz in Suburbia’: The Story of George Webb’s Dixielanders**

The Dixielanders’ founding members, George Webb and Owen Bryce, were both keen jazz enthusiasts: Webb was an amateur pianist, record collector and wartime factory worker, while Owen Bryce was a collector, record shop owner, semi-professional trumpeter, and budding jazz critic who gave record recitals at local Rhythm Clubs and contributed to a number of wartime jazz magazines.<sup>49</sup> Both Webb and Bryce recalled how the band was formed to provide an opportunity to play early

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<sup>48</sup> Owen Bryce, ‘On the Label’, *Jazzology*, January 1947, pp. 18-21 (p. 18).

<sup>49</sup> George Webb’s Dixielanders Panel Discussion, 100 Club, London, 10 April 1989, British Library, National Sound Archive Live Recording Programme, NSA B4059. Bryce recalls writing for *Jazz Tempo*, *Intro*, *Pick Up*, and compiling a comprehensive list of errata for Charles Delaunay’s *Hot Discographie*. He was also a regular contributor to *Jazzology*. See Owen Bryce, *The George Webb Story: My Part* (Blisworth: Owen Bryce, 2001), p. 3.

jazz, in contrast to the focus on swing at the Bexleyheath Rhythm Club. Speaking in 1989, Webb remembered lengthy jam sessions on tunes like ‘Doggin’ Around’ and ‘Blue Lou’, whereas the Dixielanders preferred repertoire that was recorded by New Orleans and Chicago musicians of the 1910s-1930s. Since only two members had any formal musical training, the band adopted an informal and primarily aural approach to learning repertoire. As Webb recalled:

We’d sit down, put a record on... ‘do you know so and so?’ [...] then we’d start playing and then ‘hold it!’ [...] ‘where’d you get your tune from?’ [...] ‘well I got mine off the [Louis Armstrong] Hot Five [record]’ [...] ‘well, I got mine off the Bob Crosby record’, so between us we’d sort out what we wanted [...] [what] was the right thing to do.<sup>50</sup>

It is worth surveying here the recorded origins of a number of the tunes performed by the Dixielanders. ‘Fidgety Feet’ and ‘Bluin’ the Blues’ had both been recorded by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, while ‘Drop that Sack’, ‘Willie the Weeper’, and ‘Come Back Sweet Papa’ were Louis Armstrong numbers dating from the early to mid 1920s. Armstrong’s closest musical contemporary, Joe ‘King’ Oliver, provided the inspiration for several efforts, including ‘Dippermouth Blues’ and ‘Riverside Blues’, while ‘Copenhagen’ and ‘Royal Garden Blues’ were associated with the Chicago-based cornettist Bix Beiderbecke. Several tunes in the Dixielanders’ repertoire were of more recent vintage, showing the influence of the later, predominantly white Chicago school: both ‘Hesitating Blues’ and ‘Bluin’ the Blues’

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<sup>50</sup> Interview with George Webb, 29 October 1986, British Library, National Sound Archive Oral History of Jazz in Britain, NSA C122/24-25.

had recently been recorded by Muggsy Spanier, and ‘Georgia Cake Walk’ by the pianist Art Hodes.<sup>51</sup>

With few aspirations towards a professional career or commercial success, the Dixielanders began to play at Rhythm Clubs and Home Guard dances around London. Webb recalled that their ‘standard of playing was very ordinary’, but the aim was to ‘[sit] there...and [enjoy] ourselves’.<sup>52</sup> By March 1945, the Dixielanders had attracted the attention of London’s jazz cognoscenti. *Melody Maker* critic Max Jones had begun to travel weekly to the suburb of Barnehurst to hear the band play, and wrote about the band’s ‘revival of the Dixieland style’ in the magazine’s ‘Collectors’ Corner’. At a performance before a capacity crowd at the West London Rhythm Club, Jones was struck by the band’s antique sound, which ‘[relied] wholly on the repertory of classic jazz tunes and the traditional arrangements with slight variations’. The audience approved: ‘It can be truthfully claimed’, Jones observed, ‘that the applause given to Webb’s Dixielanders was of an order customarily reserved for visiting transatlantic celebrities.’<sup>53</sup>

The Dixielanders – now an eight-piece line up – came to be represented in the musical press in terms familiar to the New Orleans revival movement.<sup>54</sup> A profile of the band written by their manager, Jim Godbolt, framed the group according to revivalist priorities: first, he attributed the band’s success to their ‘genuine [concern]

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<sup>51</sup> Early repertoire from Max Jones, ‘Brand’s Essence of News’, *Melody Maker*, 10 March 1945, p. 6 as well as George Webb’s Dixielanders, *George Webb’s Dixielanders* (Jazzology J-122, 1985), a compilation LP of the band’s earliest private recordings.

<sup>52</sup> Dixielanders Panel Discussion, NSA Live Recording Programme.

<sup>53</sup> Jones, ‘Brand’s Essence of News’. NB: Jones was filling in for journalist Pat Brand in his usual column.

<sup>54</sup> The band’s personnel by the end of World War II was: Webb on piano, Bryce on cornet, Reg Rigden on 2nd cornet, Wally Fawkes on clarinet, Eddie Harvey on trombone, Buddy Vallis on banjo, Roy Wykes on drums, and Art Streatfield on sousaphone.



with maintaining the original calibre of the jazz band', highlighting their 'exciting instrumental interplay' and commitment to a canon of 'authentic' jazz. Second, Godbolt emphasised the band's amateur status: playing music 'of their own choosing' limited the band's success while distinguishing them from the contemporary mainstream. 'They have played nearly every local dance hall – but only once', Godbolt noted wryly.

Despite the Dixielanders' growing profile, the band still faced scepticism and hostility. Webb recalled the antipathy with which he and the Dixielanders were viewed by other, more 'conventional' musicians when starting out:

We got very little help from the dance band musicians, who regarded us as idiots, because naturally they were judging us on musical standards, and our musical standards compared with theirs was [sic] very low [...] The jazz music they understood was the big swing band era [sic] and the very academic type of playing [...] but our stuff to them was absolutely foreign and they looked down their noses at it very much.<sup>55</sup>

A number of critics took a dim view of the band's dedication to early jazz recordings. Edgar Jackson, writing in the *Melody Maker*, complained that Webb's recordings of 'South' and 'London Blues' demonstrated that

all [George Webb's Dixielanders] do is copy rather slavishly that which has been heard on records for years, without any individuality and with a musicianship that leaves a good deal to be desired.<sup>56</sup>

Importantly, even collectors who were invested in the New Orleans revival had misgivings about the group's success. Albert McCarthy advised caution, observing

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<sup>55</sup> Interview with George Webb, National Sound Archive Oral History of Jazz in Britain; Gelly, *An Unholy Row*, p. 24.

<sup>56</sup> Edgar Jackson, 'I prefer Gold's Dixieland', *Melody Maker*, 10 May 1947, p. 3.

that the Webb band were ‘only copyists’ and that their burgeoning popularity among jazz audiences was in danger of exceeding that which might be afforded an actual New Orleans group.<sup>57</sup> Although most commentators would make an effort to clothe their criticisms in ostensibly objective terms, commenting on the Dixielanders’ poor intonation or ragged ensemble, critics’ disapproval stemmed primarily from their perception of the Dixielanders as a poor copy of the ‘real thing’.<sup>58</sup>

Concerns over the Dixielanders’ legitimacy can be interpreted as part of a wider debate about the health of the British jazz scene. Charles Wilford encapsulated the anxiety felt by many critics and musicians, writing in 1946 that ‘an English musician cannot play jazz naturally, or “out of his head,” as the American musician can.’ If jazz was identified as uniquely American, then it followed that British musicians ‘must first make a study of [jazz’s] history and development [...] and [...] listen with infinite care to the master jazz musicians of the past and present.’ Those who did not, Wilford reflected, could only hope to achieve ‘an imitation *from the outside* of its superficial characteristics.’<sup>59</sup> Yet for James Asman, organiser of the pro-revivalist Jazz Appreciation Society, Webb’s band offered exactly this commitment, giving ‘infinite care’ to their American models. Asman distinguished the Dixielanders from other British groups who had fallen foul of the temptations of commercial success and the ‘riff-strewn influences of popular swing, so much in demand [...] [in] the West End’; Webb’s Dixielanders, in contrast, showed

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<sup>57</sup> Albert McCarthy, ‘London Newsletter’, *The Record Changer*, [c. July 1945], clipping in National Jazz Archive, George Webb Collection, Press Cuttings.

<sup>58</sup> For more critical reviews of the Dixielanders, see James Asman, ‘What the Critics Say about Jazz 001’, *Jazz*, 3.1 (1945), 19-20.

<sup>59</sup> Charles Wilford, ‘Jazz Over England’, in *The PL Yearbook of Jazz*, ed. by Albert McCarthy (London: Editions Poetry London, 1946), pp. 9-16 (p. 9).

not one iota of interest in anything but the purest of jazz music [...] [and] adamantly refus[ed] to play anything but the most traditional numbers.<sup>60</sup>

Thus Asman saw them as the potential pioneers of a new, rejuvenated national jazz culture. Recalling his first acquaintance with the Dixielanders at a Home Guard dance in South East London, Asman recounted how he and his wife ‘realised that we had found a band which could and did play British jazz’.<sup>61</sup>

The Dixielanders have often been described as the first British ‘New Orleans-style’ band, or the first to put into practice ideas circulating in revivalist criticism. Yet an examination of the band’s repertoire and early reception suggests that they should be located in a broader category of ‘New Orleans-influenced’ jazz, rather than the restrictive ‘New Orleans style’ that is typical of the ‘reconstructionist phase’ of the revival. Although the band’s inclusion of two cornets and a sousaphone has invited comparisons to Louis Armstrong and King Oliver’s early recordings, as well as recordings modelled on them by Lu Watters’s Yerba Buena Band in San Francisco, Owen Bryce has been reluctant to acknowledge this influence. Pointing out that the Dixielanders had not heard Watters’s recordings until the day before their first recording session in July 1945, Bryce maintained that the band’s overall style and repertoire

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<sup>60</sup> James Asman, ‘George Webb and Tony Short’, *Vox Pop*, 2.3 (March 1945), 8-9. Godbolt would cast the Dixielanders’ close imitations of recordings in similar terms, arguing that ‘although their music is frankly derivative, the copying of celebrated recordings is effected with understanding, ability and tremendous virility. Webb’s musicians have successfully assimilated the spirit of the music as well as the note sequences. Of the note-for-note breaks, none can complain, for these are honest attempts to perpetuate the often unsurpassable originals’. See Jim Godbolt, ‘Jazz in Suburbia’, *Melody Maker*, 21 July 1945, p. 4.

<sup>61</sup> Asman, ‘George Webb and Tony Short’, p. 9.

owed more to Muggsy Spanier's Ragtimers, the Bud Freeman Band, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band and the New Orleans Rhythm Kings than to either King Oliver, Bunk Johnson or Lu Watters.<sup>62</sup>

Most important to critics was not such a fine distinction of style but the Dixielanders' overall approach to performance. While many later sources describe the band as a 'New Orleans' revival group, few contemporaneous ones do so. Despite the fact that jazz's essence and origins were ever more closely associated with New Orleans and its musicians, writers like Jim Godbolt and Rex Harris preferred to describe the band's ethos as that of 'basic', 'classic', 'real' or 'early' jazz, rather than 'New Orleans jazz'.<sup>63</sup>

Nevertheless, Bryce went further, refuting the importance of fidelity to 'classic' or 'authentic' jazz:

We ourselves had no special thoughts about New Orleans, nor indeed any other particular brand [...] To us it was simply jazz with the possible exception that Swing was just the wrong side of the fence and so to be avoided [...] The bands we were most interested in [were] [...] Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington and Luis Russell [...] Muggsy Spanier, Red Nichols, Bix Beiderbecke, Joe Venuti and Eddie Lang, Sidney Bechet, Armstrong and Eddie Condon [...] Our interest was in playing what we considered good jazz and no question of style ever came into it.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Bryce, *The George Webb Story*, pp. 10-11. Asman noted that this instrumentation and the arrangements devised for it 'gave the Dixielanders much of the vitality, the excitement and the authentic sound'. See James Asman, Liner notes to *George Webb's Dixielanders* (Jazzology J-122, 1985).

<sup>63</sup> See, for instance, Godbolt, 'Jazz in Suburbia'; Rex Harris, 'He Made You Jazz Conscious', *Sound* (July 1949), p. 34.

<sup>64</sup> Bryce, *The George Webb Story*, p. 16.

Perhaps Bryce (writing in 2001) was responding to recent writing about the British revival movement, which has focused on other musicians or later developments, and does not probe deeply into the history of the Dixielanders. Hilary Moore, for instance, views the band's activities as 'the first seeds of the British jazz revival', but since her focus is on Ken Colyer, the Dixielanders are considered an earlier manifestation of this self-consciously New Orleans-inspired cornettist's approach rather than granted their own complexities.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, Ekins and McKay emphasise traditional jazz of the early-mid 1950s, considering the Dixielanders only in passing. By this slightly later period, New Orleans revivalism had indeed become factionalist and intransigent; as Moore demonstrates, Colyer's dedication to replicating the performance styles of New Orleans musicians who had never left the city – he went AWOL from the Merchant Navy to do so – encapsulates both the revivalists' dogged pursuit of origins and their narrow view of 'authentic' jazz. While such tensions were incipient while the Dixielanders were active, they had not yet reached the intensity that they would in the 1950s, in the period that has been better studied.

Alternatively, Bryce's testimony may propose a counter-narrative to the Dixielanders' formation and early activity, one that highlights the band's formative period and wider musical influences. The Dixielanders' membership did not immediately settle on its familiar, eight-piece lineup. Following his first appearance at the Bexleyheath Rhythm Club as a record recitalist, Bryce invited Webb and other new acquaintances to his home on a Sunday afternoon for another listening session. Here, they discussed forming a band, as well as whom to invite:

Whether the final choice depended on musical ability, love of jazz, or merely positions held in the [Bexleyheath rhythm] club will [...] never be known,

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<sup>65</sup> Moore, *Inside British Jazz*, pp. 38-39.

probably a mixture of all three [...] The personnel for the first performance four weeks later is interesting in view of the many articles which have [...] mentioned the beginnings of the George Webb Dixielanders[.] They got it all wrong [...] we consisted of trumpet [Bryce], alto sax doubling clarinet [Bill Paviour], tenor sax [Bill Harrow], piano [Webb], guitar [Dick Denny], string bass [Harry Aubrey] and drums [Roy Beckwith].<sup>66</sup>

Bryce's recollection is significant as it suggests that the Dixielanders did not establish the band with a view to replicating a particular instrumentation. Rather, a shared enthusiasm for early jazz – not necessarily reflected in each man's choice of instrument – appears to have been the driving factor.

Furthermore, the band's early instrumentation can be read as a sign of their intent. Although they have often been portrayed as idealistic visionaries following their own path, and Webb in particular recalled the demeaning attitude of some contemporaries, the Dixielanders' early activities suggest that they were well integrated in the South East London semi-professional dance band scene. Bryce had played in small dance bands since 1936 and had recently joined the Stan Atkins Orchestra, a well-known local dance band that often performed at the Embassy Ballroom and the Working Mens' Club in Welling, Kent.<sup>67</sup> Although less experienced as a performer, Webb also had close links with local dance band musicians: he had been encouraged to set up the Bexleyheath Rhythm Club by his colleagues at the Vickers armaments factory who were amateur and semi-professional dance band musicians, so that they could have an informal space to

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<sup>66</sup> Bryce, *The George Webb Story*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with George Webb, National Sound Archive Oral History of Jazz in Britain.

play.<sup>68</sup> Among these musicians was Harry Aubrey, whom Bryce remembers taking part in early rehearsals with the Dixielanders, as noted above. The musicians who regularly jammed at the club would eventually form the Eltham Studio Band. This group was active semi-professionally around South East London, and they were awarded second place in the same 1944 *Melody Maker* Dance Band contest that first brought attention to the Dixielanders. Webb recalled that the Dixielanders had only attended the contest to support the Eltham Studio Band, and had entered as a joke, and a way to get free entry.<sup>69</sup> These personal links situate the band within a stylistically diverse field of amateur music-making. What is more, Bryce's and Webb's recollections, while acknowledging that antipathy existed between revivalist jazz enthusiasts and dance band musicians, indicate contexts in which these musicians interacted on more favourable terms.

Connections among the Dixielanders and their contemporaries are echoed in audible stylistic overlaps between 'authentic' jazz and more popular forms. The *Melody Maker*'s contest report provides details of the Eltham Studio Band's entry, noting their performance of 'St. James Infirmary' and 'South Rampart Street Parade'. These compositions possess dual lineages, having been recorded by New York-based 'hot' groups and swing bands, but also by musicians with firmer connections to jazz's New Orleans roots. More surprising is the influence of swing on the Dixielanders, as heard in a 1944 recording of 'When The Saints Go Marching

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<sup>68</sup> Dixielanders Panel Discussion, National Sound Archive Live Recording Programme. Webb also recalls being involved with forming a factory band that played in the canteen: 'A lot of the musicians had come in there [the factory] during the war to make sure they wouldn't get called up, which was very sensible [...] I found about 18 really good musicians [...] I knew most of them because they played in local dance bands before the war broke out in the area, and me and my mates used to follow them around on a Saturday night, and ask them to play things like "Rocking in Rhythm" and things like that.'

<sup>69</sup> Interview with George Webb, National Sound Archive Oral History of Jazz in Britain.

In' taken from an off-air transcription recording from the BBC's Overseas Recorded Broadcasting Service (Sound Ex. 2.1). 'The Saints' was one of the band's most popular numbers and, partly for this reason, has been consistently associated with the British New Orleans revival. The recording begins with two choruses of frontline, 'collective' improvisation around the head: Bryce's and Rigden's cornets take the tune, while Fawkes's clarinet and Harvey's trombone weave improvisations around it. This is typical of many of the Dixielanders's performances, and characteristic of New Orleans jazz as it had come to be defined. The next choruses break the mould, however, as clarinetist Wally Fawkes takes a solo without any horns in support – rare in the Dixielanders' early recordings. Additionally, Fawkes departs from the perpetual-motion arpeggiation that was his usual role, playing more concise phrases. At the beginning of his second solo chorus, Fawkes features a repeated ascending riff, more akin to a big band saxophone solo than a traditional clarinet one.

Swing influence on 'The Saints' is further indicated by two vocal choruses by trombonist Eddie Harvey, which draw on conventions of popular swing and dance band performance. Harvey introduces vocal portamento into the melody towards the end of his second chorus, while adding a grainy, uninhibited quality to the final 'when the saints go marching in'. This slurred style, at once relaxed and yet rough-hewn, is common in contemporaneous small-group recordings by British bands, such as Vic Lewis and Jack Parnell's versions of 'Mean Old Bed Bug Blues' (Sound Ex. 2.2) and 'Is You Is, Or Is You Ain't My Baby?' (Sound Ex. 2.3), both of which were recorded the same year as the Dixielanders' rendition of 'When The Saints'.<sup>70</sup> More broadly, this vocal style points to the influence of vocalist and

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<sup>70</sup> Vic Lewis and Jack Parnell's Jazzmen frequently combined repertoire associated with early 'classic' jazz and Dixieland with contemporary swing numbers. Over several recording sessions in 1945, for instance, the Lewis-Parnell Jazzmen recorded



trombonist Jack Teagarden, a versatile musician associated both with smaller ‘Chicago’ groups including those of Red Nichols, Eddie Condon, Wingy Manone, and later Louis Armstrong, as well as with big bands led by Paul Whiteman, Benny Goodman, and Glenn Miller. The other members of the Dixielanders provide a repeated sung chorus response, akin to those heard in American swing bandleader Sammy Kaye’s 1941 hit ‘Oh Daddy’ (Sound Example 2.4), and also Louis Armstrong’s 1938 recording of ‘When The Saints’ with Luis Russell’s big band (Sound Example 2.5). This latter was the only recording of ‘The Saints’ available to the Dixielanders until 1946.<sup>71</sup> The band also attempt what Eddie Harvey recalled as a ‘Luis Russell sort of backing’, involving Bryce, Rigden, and Fawkes playing the melody beneath Harvey’s trombone improvisation. As this continues, Fawkes takes over the improvisation, while Harvey combines improvised fills with a ‘response’ to the main melody drawn from the earlier sung chorus. The result suggests both the collective improvisation of New Orleans jazz common to many of the Dixielanders recordings, and the layering of multiple riffs as in contemporary swing.

Despite the Dixielanders’ close identification with British interest in New Orleans jazz, both documentary evidence and the bandmembers’ recollections reveal a more complex situation. Rather than idealistic visionaries, ‘ploughing a lonely furrow’ for ‘real’ jazz, as critic Rex Harris would portray them in 1949, the

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such ‘traditional’ numbers as ‘Dippermouth Blues’, ‘Fidgety Feet’, ‘Copenhagen’, and ‘Bluin’ The Blues’ – all by this time stalwarts of the Dixielanders’ repertoire – as well as popular song repertoire such as ‘Lady Be Good’, ‘Mean to Me’, and ‘Down By The Old Mill Stream’ and swing instrumentals of their own composition. See David Taylor, ‘Vic Lewis (1940-1948)’, *British Modern Jazz – from the 1940s Onwards*, <<http://henrybebop.co.uk/lewis.htm>> [accessed 10 April 2016].

<sup>71</sup> George Webb’s Dixielanders Panel Discussion, National Sound Archive Live Recording Programme. Armstrong’s ‘When The Saints Go Marching In’ was arranged by Luis Russell, recorded 18 May 1938 and released in the UK in 1939 on Decca F7056. See Jos Willems, *All of Me: The Complete Discography of Louis Armstrong* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2006), p. 112.

Dixielanders combined an interest in the repertoire, performance style, and broader musical ethos of New Orleans revivalism with a similar involvement with the musicians, venues, and styles associated with more conventional dance band and swing music.<sup>72</sup> In the following section, I explore how this discrepancy may affect our understanding of jazz revivalism in Britain.

### **Revivalism Reconsidered**

While the overlaps between swing and early jazz revivalism in the Dixielanders' activities may suggest that the British revival movement was simply in its developmental stages, with 'traditional' and 'modern' positions not yet entrenched, I propose an alternate reading: that the Dixielanders' activities, and their decision to pursue revivalist principles, were prompted by the social and cultural context in which the band found themselves. Bithell and Hill find that musical revivals yield greater insight when viewed in terms of their response to contemporary circumstances, rather than their approach to material from the past; the latter often draws on predictable tropes of authenticity, history, or heritage. Revivalists should be thought of as 'activists', whose 'decontextualisation' and 'recontextualisation' of the musical past is first and foremost an engagement with or response to the present.<sup>73</sup> Contextualising 1940s British revivalism therefore requires that we address the impact of the Second World War on British jazz performance and appreciation, as well as on the entertainment industry more broadly.

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<sup>72</sup> Harris, 'He Made You Jazz Conscious'.

<sup>73</sup> Bithell and Hill, 'An Introduction to Music Revival as Concept, Cultural Process, and Medium of Change', p. 4.

As Will Studdert has noted, dance music and jazz were identified as key morale boosters from the outbreak of the war.<sup>74</sup> There were significant concerns about the war's impact on the entertainment industry's financial and cultural wellbeing, however. Tensions flared in the *Melody Maker* during the first months of the conflict, as performers, band leaders, and promoters debated whether musicians could best 'do their bit' with rifles or instruments. While both the profession and the musical press favoured the notion that performing – particularly in dance bands – was vital for morale, they were acutely sensitive to any suggestion that musicians might use their occupation to avoid service. In early 1940, the dance band leader Bert Ambrose caused a stir in an interview with the *Evening Standard*, during which he argued:

my boys are doing better national service where they are...the people who amuse the troops are as important as any Ministry of What-Have-You [...] when a man can be proved to be one of the best dance musicians of his time and to be doing good service for the troops and others, I think he should be exempted from the Army.<sup>75</sup>

The *Evening Standard* ran Ambrose's comments anonymously under the headline 'Swingsters Want Exemption from Military Service', reporting that a 'famous bandleader' had told them that 'several leading band leaders intend to apply for war

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<sup>74</sup> As the *Melody Maker* predicted a day before war was declared: 'It is argued that jazz, in particular, being a virtual prerogative of youth, will be practically stilled by the mobilisation of the young men who now create it. That is a fallacy. Come what may, there will not even be a lull in jazz [...] Music, indeed, comes right into its own in times of national menace [...] because it is the main prop of any country's morale. See 'Crisis Consequences, A Jazz Accompaniment to the March of Time', *Melody Maker*, 2 September 1939, p. 1, quoted in Will Studdert, "'We've Got a Gig in Poland!': Britain and jazz in World War II', *Jazz Research Journal*, 7.1 (2013), 79-111, p. 80.

<sup>75</sup> 'Ambrose's Statement to the M.M.', *Melody Maker*, 3 February 1940, p. 1.

service exemption for some of their musicians'. The *Melody Maker* issued a staunch rebuttal, insisting that British musicians

are not cowards [...] or shirkers. They are doing what they have been asked to do – to carry on with their jobs until called to take a greater hand in the struggle.<sup>76</sup>

Along with rebuttals sent in by other bandleaders, the paper offered the still-anonymous speaker 'the freedom of our columns to put forward his ideas at further length'.<sup>77</sup> Ambrose responded in a follow-up article, insisting that his words had been taken out of context. Nevertheless, he remained firm that playing music was 'war work', and that '25 or 50 of our best young musicians ought to be exempted from war service to help maintain the standards of dance music at home'.<sup>78</sup>

Ambrose's concerns were well founded: mobilisation, petrol rationing, and blackouts – not to mention the increasing intensity of aerial attacks on British cities and transport infrastructure – were decimating the entertainment industry. By March 1940, bands 'all over the country were beginning to feel the pinch', the *Melody Maker* reported, as musicians were called into the forces. The situation was particularly acute in the Midlands, where musicians were not only being called up but leaving voluntarily for better-paid work in local munitions factories.<sup>79</sup> Reports poured in each week of lengthy delays on the roads and rails, as well as last-minute personnel changes and cancellations due to wartime restrictions.<sup>80</sup> As the Blitz intensified in the Autumn of 1940, the *Melody Maker's* early optimism about the

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<sup>76</sup> 'Profession Up In Arms at "Exemption" Slur', *Melody Maker*, 27 January 1940, pp. 1-2 (p. 1).

<sup>77</sup> 'Profession Up In Arms at "Exemption" Slur', p. 2.

<sup>78</sup> 'Ambrose's Statement to the M.M.'.

<sup>79</sup> 'The Boys Are Off', *Melody Maker*, 16 March 1940, p. 1.

<sup>80</sup> See, for example, 'Bands in Biggest Hold-Up Ever', *Melody Maker*, 3 February 1940, p. 1.

profession's durability was giving way to stifled panic. Despite the a masthead proclaiming 'Still Cheerful – Still Going Strong – Still 12 Pages', the paper's lead article struck a different tone:

It is no use blinking [sic] the facts. The resultant dislocation of traffic, the uncertainty as to when audiences will be able to return home [...] the sounding of [the air-raid] warning just as the evening's programme is about to start – these have had an inevitable and serious effect upon West-End business.<sup>81</sup>

While some venues, particularly those in the provinces, were able to schedule matinées, those in former centres of nightlife had little room for manoeuvre. Prominent venues closed temporarily, including the Empire theatres in Chiswick, Hackney, Shepherds Bush, and Wood Green; the Palladium, the Holborn Empire, and the Hippodrome; and the Embassy Club in Mayfair. Soon the dangers of air-raids, collateral damage from anti-aircraft fire, and the difficulties of navigating London's cratered streets had forced the closure of other venues, including the '400' Club, the Café Anglais, and the Café de Paris.<sup>82</sup> Above all, the *Melody Maker* feared imposition of a curfew or other restrictions on night-time activities, which it regarded as 'a very serious step [...] [that] would [affect] the livelihood of several thousand persons', not to mention harming morale.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> "'M.M." Investigates the Air-Raid Situation', *Melody Maker*, 14 September 1940, p. 1.

<sup>82</sup> 'Cafe Anglais...400...Berkeley Bands Out', *Melody Maker*, 21 September 1940, p. 1. See also Christina L. Baade, *Victory through Harmony: The BBC and Popular Music in World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 90. The closure of the latter venue, the *Melody Maker* reported, gave a well-earned holiday to Ken 'Snakehips' Johnson and his West Indian Dance Orchestra. Only months later Johnson and several other musicians would be fatally wounded when the then-reopened Café de Paris suffered a direct hit.

<sup>83</sup> "'M.M." Investigates the Air-Raid Situation'. Other towns and cities, particularly centres of industry, had already instigated night time curfews. See, for instance, '11

Yet, as Will Studdert argues, these obstacles did little to dent enthusiasm for jazz and swing during the 1940s. Music and dance dimmed awareness of the constant threat of attack and provided an opportunity to show that one was ‘staying put’ and ‘carrying on’.<sup>84</sup> More intimate musical entertainments held at ‘bottle parties’ in venues such as Jig’s Club, the El Morocco, and the Cocoanut Grove [sic] also came into their own in this period since basement clubs were less susceptible to air raids. While such venues were treated with suspicion by the authorities, given their ‘low’ clientele and suspected black market activity, ‘bottle parties’ became synonymous with the swing jam sessions that emerged out of the fragmented entertainment scene.<sup>85</sup> These venues’ success as ‘authentic’ spaces where jazz could thrive, not to mention their associations with vice and immorality, drew in part on the presence of black British and Caribbean musicians, most notably trumpeter Cyril Blake.<sup>86</sup> ‘Jamming’, Catherine Tackley has argued, fit prevailing ideas of unmediated black music-making, but the smaller ensembles that populated these ‘bottle parties’ also offered greater opportunities for professional and semi-

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P.M. Curfew At Dundee’, *Melody Maker*, 14 September 1940, p. 9. Despite repeated scares (see ‘Serious Threat to Public Dance Music’, *Melody Maker*, 21 March 1941, p. 1), London was never under official curfew, although venues were often requisitioned for war-related purposes. For more on the dance hall and entertainment industry during the war, see James Nott, *Going to the Palais: A Social and Cultural History of Dancing and Dance Halls in Britain, 1918-1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 46-71.

<sup>84</sup> Studdert, “‘We’ve Got A Gig in Poland!’”, pp. 88-89. The phrases ‘staying put’ and ‘carry on’ appeared often in *Melody Maker* accounts of efforts being made to surmount wartime difficulties. ‘Staying put’ in particular echoed the official advice for the general public in the event of Nazi invasion. See “‘M.M.’ Investigates the Air-Raid Situation’.

<sup>85</sup> Studdert, “‘We’ve Got A Gig in Poland!’”, pp. 89-90.

<sup>86</sup> Studdert, “‘We’ve Got A Gig in Poland!’”, pp. 90-95; Catherine Tackley, ‘Race, Identity, and the Meaning of Jazz in 1940s Britain’, in *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945*, ed. by Jon Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 11-26.

professional musicians to ‘sit in’ than did the more pedestrian restaurant, hotel, and theatre bands.<sup>87</sup>

Interestingly, semi-professional performance increased in response to the mobilisation of professionals. In January 1940, the *Melody Maker* announced that it would still run its amateur dance band contests that year, despite fears to the contrary. Since the entertainment industry had been decimated, wartime contests frequently featured professional musicians adapting to straitened circumstances. ‘Amateur’ contests therefore became a key part of the suburban and provincial wartime musical economy, drawing professional and semi-professional activity closer together to fill the gaps left by the call-up. As one professional bandleader in the north of England described to the *Melody Maker*,

there are still more bands than engagements, and it is pretty obvious that the best [band] will get the dates *provided that the local bookers know of the band’s [continued] existence*. Contesting [...] lets the local dance promoters know which bands are still in existence, but, because they can hear them all together [...] at the same time, to decide which they like best, and give out their engagements accordingly.<sup>88</sup>

The *Melody Maker* was quick to address the needs of a burgeoning community of jazz, swing, and dance music enthusiasts in the Forces, too. As well as offering its serving readers a subscription to the paper in exchange for one day’s pay,<sup>89</sup> the *Melody Maker* instigated the ‘Forces Letter-Box’. Modelled on the paper’s popular Letters page and ‘Collectors’ Corner’ column, the ‘Forces Letter-Box’ invited

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<sup>87</sup> Studdert, “‘We’ve Got A Gig in Poland!’”, 90; Jim Godbolt, *A History of Jazz in Britain, 1919-50*, 4th edn (London: Northway, 2010), pp. 192-195.

<sup>88</sup> ‘Re-Starting of “M.M.” Contests: Bands’ Enthusiasm’, *Melody Maker*, 27 January 1940, p. 7.

<sup>89</sup> “‘M.M.” Gesture to the Fighting Forces’, *Melody Maker*, 27 January 1940, p. 1.

readers to write in for ‘news of old pals, orchestrations, instruments, records, or just to send greetings’. Letters poured in as overseas readers requested donations of gramophones and radio sets. Members of one company in the Essex Regiment wanted several records by Duke Ellington, as well as copies of Delaunay’s *Hot Discographie* and Schleman’s *Rhythm on Record*. But the most frequent requests were for instruments, so that servicemen could band together to entertain their units.<sup>90</sup> While some of these requests may have come from professional musicians, the bulk will have been amateur enthusiasts, thrown together by mobilisation and eager for some form of entertainment.<sup>91</sup>

Rhythm Clubs were particularly adaptable to wartime circumstances, and saw a resurgence of activity. Although the No. 1 Rhythm Club in central London had scaled back their activities to ‘informal’ recitals on Sundays following the onset of the Blitz, by late April 1941 the club had re-opened at the Bag O’ Nails on Kingly Street in Soho, where they began to hold twice-weekly meetings. In addition to record recitals, the No. 1 Rhythm Club became particularly noted for its jam sessions and performances by black British swing musicians – including Cyril Blake, Leslie Hutchinson, York de Souza, and Lauderic Caton – who were active in the ‘bottle party’ venues.<sup>92</sup> Other clubs followed the lead of the *Melody Maker* by extending

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<sup>90</sup> ‘Forces Letter-Box’, *Melody Maker*, 15 March 1941, p. 2.

<sup>91</sup> For more on lack of entertainment during the early period of the war, see Studdert, “‘We’ve Got A Gig in Poland!’”, pp. 96-101. I surmise that correspondence in the ‘Forces Letter-Box’ came primarily from amateurs as it is likely that newly conscripted professional musicians would have had existing personal and professional connections to draw on if they wanted to source records, sheet music, or instruments.

<sup>92</sup> For disruption to the No. 1 Rhythm Club, see ‘Late Rhythm Clubs’, *Melody Maker*, 14 September 1940, p. 12; for the club’s reopening and later meeting schedules see ‘No. 1 Rhythm Club Re-Opens’, *Melody Maker*, 26 April 1941, p. 1; and ‘No. 1 Rhythm Club to Meet Twice Weekly’, *Melody Maker*, 17 May 1941, p. 9. For a further discussion of Rhythm Clubs as venues for black British jazz



their resources to serving soldiers. The Yorkshire-based Northern Federation of Rhythm Clubs, for instance, offered a library of record recital scripts to enthusiasts in the Forces. These had been written ‘by a dozen or more of the most well known and experienced recitalists in the country’, and allowed for record substitutions in case particular examples were not available.<sup>93</sup>

Most significant for jazz appreciation were the Rhythm Clubs’ potential as morale boosters and as models of wartime ideals. As Christina Baade has pointed out, there were overlaps between soldiers and fans of jazz and swing: both groups comprised young men from diverse class backgrounds. Furthermore, communal listening and discussion was a favoured pastime for those on active duty. This overlap was key to the BBC’s decision to instigate a special programme of radio broadcasts ‘For the Forces’ which ran from 1940 onwards.<sup>94</sup> A highlight of the new service was the *Radio Rhythm Club*, which presented record recitals, discussions, and most notably, live performances by British jazz and swing musicians. In addition to its ‘house’ band, a sextet led by the clarinettist Harry Parry, *Radio Rhythm Club* drew on a roster of players who were active in the Soho ‘bottle party’ scene and other London Rhythm Clubs. In doing so, *Radio Rhythm Club*’s popularity demonstrated the importance of idealised spaces in wartime cultural life, in which musicians and enthusiasts could meet and create ‘authentic’ and ‘spontaneous’ jazz. As I have noted above, the Bexleyheath Rhythm Club was formed so that dance band musicians engaged in local war work would have a space to play. Moreover,

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performance, see Tackley, ‘Race, Identity, and the Meaning of Jazz in 1940s Britain’.

<sup>93</sup> ‘Rhythm Club Forum’, *Northern Society for Jazz Study*, 2.15 (December 1944), 15.

<sup>94</sup> Baade, *Victory Through Harmony*, pp. 105-6, 108. Baade has also noted that the idealised profile of the Rhythm Club member was not all that different from the BBC’s own desired audience profile of the ‘mentally attentive, physically relaxed, and education-minded male listener.’

Rhythm Clubs were idealised as integrated spaces where ethnic barriers dissolved and international friendships were cultivated through music. This can be seen in the West London Rhythm Club's yearbook *Jazz Junction Jive*, which was published every January. In a roundup of activities during 1943, club secretary Geoff Armstrong drew attention to the group's 'essential democracy', observing that

Here [at the West London Rhythm Club] are people from every walk of life [...] from all parts of the world [...] whatever their colour, whatever their race, they meet here and are friends. I hope to make the personal acquaintance before long of all who have written from Australia, New Zealand, South and North Africa, India, Malta, Gibraltar, Palestine and the U.S.A. since the first issue of [*Jazz Junction Jive*].

These comments blur an egalitarian ideal of 'colourblindness' and internationalism with a primarily colonial network of jazz enthusiasts and military allies.<sup>95</sup> However, *Jazz Junction Jive* also featured a list of the year's jam session participants, which supports Armstrong's depiction of the West London Rhythm Club as a relatively diverse meeting place (including several leading black British jazz instrumentalists alongside other amateurs and professionals). Thus the Rhythm Club became a focal point for jazz appreciation where improvised performance aligned with broader social and political ideals in wartime.

Rhythm Clubs were not without their disputes, however. Baade notes the growing tensions between more active, and largely younger, participants, who were attracted by the jam sessions and performances, and the record collectors and

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<sup>95</sup> Geoff Armstrong, 'Intro...', *Jazz Junction Jive* 1.2 (January 1944), pp. 2-3 (p. 3). In turn, Armstrong's article highlights the numerous club members who were currently serving in the forces and actively promoting jazz appreciation.

connoisseurs of longer standing who had been members from the beginning.<sup>96</sup>

Underlying these tensions was the newer contingent's interest in contemporary swing, which stood in contrast to the traditional audience's preference for 'hot' jazz of the 1920s. In November 1940, an anonymous Rhythm Club secretary wrote to the *Melody Maker* lamenting the state of his local club. While the club was built on solid foundations, drawing an audience who appreciated the recordings of Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, and the Chicagoans, newer 'jitterbug' members were more interested in Gene Krupa and Glenn Miller; they attempted to play 'Begin the Beguine' by ear during the club's now ubiquitous jam sessions. 'The average rhythm club member is the curse of all true jazz lovers', asserted the secretary, concluding that he should 'chuck it all, and play my discs in the company of a few friends who really understand them.'<sup>97</sup> Although not all Rhythm Club secretaries took such a pessimistic view, tension between the 'genuine' jazz enthusiast and the 'jitterbug' swing fan was common, splitting the membership at many clubs. At the Bexleyheath Rhythm Club, for instance, the division between critics and collectors on the one hand, and amateur musicians on the other was manifested in the layout of the Red Barn public house, the club's home. Meetings were held in the basement, but after the record recital had ended, those members who did not care to attend the ensuing jam session retired upstairs to the main bar to continue discussing records.<sup>98</sup>

Resistance to jam sessions was a sign of the stylistic antipathies often located at the root of New Orleans revivalism, as well as the dichotomization of 'sincere' and 'superficial' appreciation. Yet jamming members also appealed to notions of authenticity and sincerity, in line with the wartime context. Writing in *Jazz Junction*

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<sup>96</sup> Baade, *Victory through Harmony*, p. 107.

<sup>97</sup> 'Are Rhythm Clubs Worth It?', *Melody Maker*, 23 November 1940, p. 4.

<sup>98</sup> Bryce, *The George Webb Story*, p. 5.

*Jive* in 1944, an un-named contributor took the traditionally minded members of the West London Rhythm Club to task for their dismissal of informal music-making:

Jam session . . . exit 'critics' to Saloon Bar! Why? What offends you? It can't be lack of sincerity – W. London jamsters [sic] travel from Stamford Hill, Chingford, Uxbridge, Wembley and Hendon every week just to play together . . . or Riffs – we don't use 'em . . . or lack of ideas – listen to [club members] Vesey, Newell and Lofthouse, Williams, Thomson, Callow.<sup>99</sup>

While older members of the West London Rhythm Club obviously followed the example of those in Bexleyheath by absenting themselves during the jam session, younger ones demonstrated their sincerity by travelling across war-torn London to participate. In particular, the correspondent highlights an emerging network of West London musicians who display both a musical and a personal commitment to the club.

The expansion of such amateur and semi-professional activities during the war offers a revised context for the growth of revivalist ideas. 'Authenticity' could refer not only to musical style and historical lineage, but also to activities and participation that were valued during wartime. For example, the Dixielanders' early performances show a stylistic debt to traditionalist critics who would retire upstairs to ruminate on the evening's records, yet the fact that Webb and his contemporaries chose to emulate early jazz on stage owes itself to developments in informal performance at the Rhythm Clubs. Despite the recollections of Webb and Bryce and contemporary writings that oppose the Dixielanders' mission to the jam sessions, the band was not averse to unplanned, collaborative music making. In a 1945 article

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<sup>99</sup> 'Open Letters', *Jazz Junction Jive*, 1.2 (January 1944), p. 23.

promoting the band, critic James Asman recalls how their first, albeit unsuccessful, recording session for Decca ended with

an unrecorded and impromptu Dixieland tear-up, [with pianist] Tony [Short] taking the piano stool and literally rocking the whole studio with a glorious fast blues which was eventually broken up regretfully by the hungry and home-sick engineers.<sup>100</sup>

Revivalism in 1940s Britain might therefore be understood as a cultural force that cut across the stylistic divisions it ostensibly enforced. While appreciation of ‘authentic’ jazz was often conceptualised as diametrically opposed to swing fandom, the two were closely related and even overlapped. Participants in both swing jams and revivalist performances created alternative spheres in which enthusiasts could enjoy jazz free from the pressures of wartime.

This characteristic of early 1940s revivalism manifested itself in other ways, too. From 1943 onwards, a number of London-based Rhythm Clubs held annual ‘Riverboat Shuffles’. Boats were chartered to travel up and down the Thames, with live bands and copious quantities of alcohol on board. Club politics were still visible to a degree; writing about one such event in *Jazz Junction Jive*, critic and member Ralph Venables observed that participants were ‘mostly enthusiastic youngsters who could see nothing wrong with anything...[p]articularly if the jazz was loud and fast and continuous’ and noted that the band ‘didn’t know “Georgia Cake-walk”, “Since my best gal turned me down” [or] “It’s Right Here For You” ’.<sup>101</sup> Evidently Venables was unimpressed how the Shuffle band catered to the club’s swing fans more than its

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<sup>100</sup> Asman, ‘George Webb and Tony Short’, p. 9-10. Tony Short was a British semi-professional pianist who was connected to the Dixielanders through his acquaintance with Asman, who had secured both artists a recording session at Decca.

<sup>101</sup> Ralph Venables, ‘You Asked For It, Percy!’, *Jazz Junction Jive*, 1.2 (January 1944), p. 9-10.

‘genuine’ jazz fans, with whom he identified. Yet other accounts suggest that the events appealed to both revivalist and swing perspectives. The *Melody Maker* described the first Riverboat Shuffle as an ‘invasion’ of the ‘sober upper reaches of the Thames’ by a ‘jive army’ plied with enough liquor to ‘[float] the steamer safely through any lock’.<sup>102</sup> This appropriation of military terminology was common in wartime descriptions of swing fandom; for proponents, it served to highlight swing’s youthful and contemporary spirit, while for sceptics it fed perceptions of fans’ lack of discernment and ‘fad’ mentality.<sup>103</sup> Yet, despite the ostensible swing focus of the West London Rhythm Club, which organised this first Riverboat Shuffle, the event was conceived as ‘an ambitious attempt to recreate the atmosphere of the old Mississippi days’, a narrative trope that appealed to revivalist interest in jazz’s upward migration from New Orleans to midwestern cities.<sup>104</sup> What is more, taking to the water seems to have encouraged Rhythm Club participants to leave factional disputes on the bank for the duration of the excursion. In their place was an unlikely bonhomie that mixed revivalist ideals of amateurism with extrovert ‘jitterbug’ behaviour, perhaps drawing on the fabled English pastime of ‘messaging about in boats’.<sup>105</sup> Indeed, the *Melody Maker* reported that the traditionalist critic Rex Harris ‘could not be deterred from playing trombone’ alongside the other jammers. During a later trip in 1945, on which the music was provided by the Dixielanders, the

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<sup>102</sup> ‘Rhythm on the River’, *Melody Maker*, 24 July 1943, p. 2.

<sup>103</sup> Studdert, ‘“We’ve Got A Gig in Poland!”’, pp. 79-80; Gendron, ‘Moldy Figs and Modernists’, pp. 145-146.

<sup>104</sup> Armstrong, ‘Intro...’, p. 2.

<sup>105</sup> This association is particularly significant in a wartime context, as pre-war leisure activities were frequently drawn on to provide momentary escape from contemporary traumas. The *Melody Maker* identified the ‘Riverboat Shuffle’ with the contemporaneous ‘Holidays at Home’ campaign, which discouraged non-essential civilian travel and promoted instead more traditional leisure activities. See Chris Sladen, ‘Holidays at Home in the Second World War’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 37.1 (January 2002), 67-89.

*Melody Maker* reported how Harris and fellow critic and organiser Percy Pring, ‘divested themselves of all but their pants and dived into the river for a swim’.<sup>106</sup>

Even Venables had been willing to express his misgivings regarding the 1943 event – in particular the logistics of accommodating both band and audience on the boat’s diminutive main deck – with the same anarchic ethos:

I can suggest only two solutions: one is to mount the band on the [aft] and propel the boat backwards...to avoid the smoke, and the other is to hire a couple of boats, and suspend the musicians upon a strawberry net placed between the two craft. Both solutions have their advantages.<sup>107</sup>

The multiple associations at play in the Riverboat Shuffles demonstrate a multivalency at the heart of revivalism which, as George McKay has pointed out, is often overlooked in favour of portraying the movement as ‘conservative, retrospective, unimaginative, and worse’.<sup>108</sup> Far from a set of rigid precepts about musical style or ethos, early revivalism appears to have mixed with other perspectives on music-making and recreation, and been permeated by them.<sup>109</sup> Revivalism, then, may be understood as a clutch of ideas that could be repurposed for alternative circumstances.<sup>110</sup> Explaining the Dixielanders’ distinctive irreverence towards musical standards in terms of broader revivalist discourse – as either a resistance to swing’s perceived inflexibility, or an embrace of amateurism in an essentialist substitution for ‘authentic’ blackness – is inadequate. Rather, their

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<sup>106</sup> Pat Brand, ‘Brand’s Essence of News’, *Melody Maker* 11 August 1945, p. 4.

<sup>107</sup> Venables, ‘You Asked For It, Percy!’.

<sup>108</sup> McKay, *Circular Breathing*, pp. 47-49.

<sup>109</sup> McKay, *Circular Breathing*, p. 50.

<sup>110</sup> McKay, *Circular Breathing*, pp. 64-65.

activities blended New Orleans jazz's carnivalesque spirit with a comic eccentricity that had roots in approaches to leisure and recreation closer to home.<sup>111</sup>

Perhaps most significantly, early revivalism's adaptability complicates the conclusions of scholarship that identifies the New Orleans revival as a form of disengagement from wider culture, or as a position from which to express disillusionment or disaffection.<sup>112</sup> For Hilary Moore, British musicians' adoption of 'authentic' black sounds provided 'sites of rebellion and resistance' to their contemporary circumstances.<sup>113</sup> Trumpeter Ken Colyer employed New Orleans jazz to address his social marginalisation as a member of the British working class, which he expresses through 'self-othering'. Perceiving of himself as having been born 'fifty years too late, in the wrong country, and the wrong colour', Colyer addressed his lack of social and cultural capital by casting himself as an exponent of authentic African American jazz.<sup>114</sup> This is an apposite reading of Colyer's music, but I am not sure that Moore's interpretation of revivalism as a vehicle for 'self-expression' accounts for its wider community in the Rhythm Club movement.<sup>115</sup> To begin with, her reading is based on broader assumptions about the revival as a form of retreat and about British engagement with African American music as unhealthily reliant on recordings. Moore sees records as distancing the music from its producers such that

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<sup>111</sup> It is interesting to note too that Webb's father and uncle had both worked in the Music Halls of London's East End. See Interview with George Webb, *Oral History of Jazz in Britain*.

<sup>112</sup> Tamara Livingston labels musical revivals an act of withdrawal. See 'Music Revivals: Towards a General Theory', *Ethnomusicology*, 43.1 (Winter, 1999), 66-85, p. 66.

<sup>113</sup> Deborah Wong, 'The Asian American Body in Performance', in *Music and the Racial Imagination*, ed. by Ronald M. Radano and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 57-94 (p. 77), quoted in Moore, *Inside British Jazz*, p. 57.

<sup>114</sup> Moore, *Inside British Jazz*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>115</sup> Moore, *Inside British Jazz*, p. 45.



it may be ‘distort[ed] and reimagine[d]’ by consumers.<sup>116</sup> As I have argued in chapter 1, the presumption that records automatically constitute a ‘distorting’ mediation of African American music implies the existence of another, ‘authentic’ engagement with jazz. More importantly, Moore’s interpretation does not take into account the productive and transformative power of wartime revivalist activity in Britain.<sup>117</sup> While scholarship has often examined the way in which critics and performers reimagine antique musical cultures, the Dixielanders’ activities witness a form of revivalism that also transforms the unfamiliar fields into which it is sown.

The Dixielanders’ role as ‘transforming’ revivalists may be seen in their own club, the Hot Club of London, founded in 1946. On the surface, it was a modified Rhythm Club, which sandwiched the conventional record recital between performances by the Dixielanders and other guests who shared their revivalist outlook. One early concert of August 1946 is indicative: held at the Victoria Hall in Bloomsbury Square in Central London, the programme began with a set by the Dixielanders, followed by British blues pianist Tony Short as guest artist. Next, co-editor of the *Melody Maker*’s ‘Collectors’ Corner’ Sinclair Traill offered a recital ‘featuring rare recordings of New Orleans music by [King] Oliver, Jelly Roll [Morton], [and Louis] Armstrong’. Following the interval – which, due to a quirk in the hall’s license, featured a spirits-only bar – the Dixielanders played the closing set.<sup>118</sup> Other concerts during 1946 and 1947 included recitals by leading collectors like Bill Kinnell, James Asman, Albert McCarthy, Rex Harris, and Max Jones; and

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<sup>116</sup> Moore, *Inside British Jazz*, p. 39.

<sup>117</sup> Bithell and Hill, ‘An Introduction to Music Revival as Concept, Cultural Process, and Medium of Change’, pp. 4-5.

<sup>118</sup> Owen Bryce, ‘Hot Club of London News’, *Jazzology*, 1.9 (September 1946), 18-20.

guest performances by John Haim's Jelly Roll Kings, Freddie Randall's Jazzmen, the Christie Brothers' Stompers, and the Russell Wickham Hot Six.<sup>119</sup>

Despite the club's focus on performance more than record appreciation, the Hot Club of London saw its role to be much the same as the existing Rhythm Clubs. In the Hot Club's inaugural column in the British jazz magazine *Jazzology*, Owen Bryce stated that it existed to 'promote and encourage the appreciation of jazz music through the medium of recitals, debates and jazz musicians'.<sup>120</sup> Yet the organisation of the club also set out to transform British jazz appreciation in a number of significant ways. The Hot Club's financial accounts, held in the George Webb Collection at the National Jazz Archive, provide insight into the economics of its activities. Income is generated from the sale of admissions, programmes, publicity photos, magazines, pamphlets, and recordings; outgoings include the fees and expenses paid in the organisation and running of each Hot Club event – to the Dixielanders, visiting bands or musicians, invited record recitalists, porters, electricians, and stewards. Guests appear to have commanded the highest fees. For the concert of April 19, 1947, the Freddy Randall Band were paid seven guineas (£7. 7s.), likely distributed as a guinea for each member of the six-piece band, plus an extra guinea for Randall as bandleader. John Haim's Jelly Roll Kings, a less-experienced group run by the twenty-year-old cornetist Haim, received a lower fee:

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<sup>119</sup> A collection of surviving programmes exist in the NJA's George Webb Collection. Interestingly, the Hot Club's financial accounts also show that the Dixielanders' earlier swing and dance band contacts appeared at Hot Club events; Harry Aubrey, Bev Martin, and Bill Weeden – regular jammers at the Bexleyheath Rhythm Club and later members of the Eltham Studio Band – all claim performer fees at one time or another.

<sup>120</sup> Bryce, 'Hot Club of London News', p. 18.

£5 to be shared amongst eight musicians.<sup>121</sup> The evening's record recitalist, the critic and Jazz Appreciation Society co-founder Bill Kinnell, was paid two guineas (£2. 2s.). This fee structure appears consistent across the accounts: musicians and bands typically earned a guinea each, while recitalists and leaders received two guineas.<sup>122</sup>

These fees were large in comparison to the Dixielanders', however. Webb and his band were awarded no performance fee as such, but received a few shillings for each event, plus reimbursement of any expenses. For the March 8, 1947 concert, for instance, each member of the Dixielanders drew fees of between 3s. and 8s. 6d., while trombonist Eddie Harvey claimed a further £4. 10s. in expenses. At later concerts, members of the Webb band took a flat fee of 5s., not as a performance fee per se but in recognition of their positions on the club's organising committee.<sup>123</sup> As such, the musicians received the same fee as non-performing committee members such as the band's manager, Jim Godbolt, and Minah Webb, George Webb's wife.<sup>124</sup>

The relatively high fee paid to visiting performers suggests that the Hot Club of London was not expected to provide profitable employment to the Dixielanders themselves. Instead, the club appears to have operated as a cooperative endeavour, in which the profits from each event – usually between £40 and £50 – were held for the

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<sup>121</sup> Haim would die suddenly just over a year later in January, 1949. He was 20 or 21 (his exact birthdate is not known). See John Chilton, 'Haim, John', *Who's Who of British Jazz*, ed. by John Chilton, 2nd edn (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 160.

<sup>122</sup> Hot Club of London Financial Accounts, NJA, George Webb Collection. For the concert dated 8 March 1947, Humphrey Lyttelton, Tim Moore, Harry Aubrey, Gerry Collins, Dick Denny were all paid a guinea each, with Collins receiving an extra pound. James Asman, booked as recitalist, received two guineas. For the concert dated 27 September 1947, Freddie Legon, Bill Bailey, and John Jones were each paid a guinea. On this occasion, Owen Bryce and Sinclair Traill both gave recitals, but received no fee.

<sup>123</sup> Concert of 17 May 1947, Hot Club of London Financial Accounts, NJA, George Webb Collection.

<sup>124</sup> For comparison, the hall porter and electrician – by no means unskilled but firmly logistical rather than artistic roles – were paid at least 7s. 6d. per concert, and sometimes as much as 10s.

benefit of all and to finance future events including dances and Riverboat Shuffles.<sup>125</sup>

The Dixielanders' modest fees as committee members further suggest that they saw their involvement in the Hot Club as serving the organisation's aim of fostering a space for performance and appreciation of jazz, rather than as an opportunity for their own advancement. This approach mediated between revivalist ideals of amateurism and the wider entertainment industry, carving out a semi-professional sphere that aligned with Lang's pronouncement on authentic jazz as 'music of the people...[where] money-making, while sometimes incidental to, is never the sole purpose of its production.'<sup>126</sup> Involvement in the Hot Club complemented the Webb band's other performance activities, as a roving jazz band playing dances, Rhythm Clubs, Riverboat Shuffles, and other events. Presuming that public venues paid similar fees to visiting artists as the Hot Club, the resulting semi-professional performance culture would have rewarded the itinerancy that had characterised Rhythm Club jam sessions, while also cultivating a non-commercial scene focused around a not-for-profit (yet financially stable) Hot Club.

A further transformation that can be recognised in the Hot Club's accounts is the growth of a 'casual' audience for the Dixielanders' music, in addition to the connoisseurs and revivalists. The club charged general admission at 3s. 6d., with a reduced rate of 2s. 6d. for those who purchased an annual membership, priced at 2s. At each gig, there were significantly more non-members than members. On March 8, for instance, the club admitted 43 members (taking £5. 7s. 6d.) and 319 non-members (taking £55. 16s. 6d.); of an audience of 362 people, members made up less than 12%. Accounts for subsequent concerts provide a similar picture: non-

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<sup>125</sup> The Club announced its intention to organise dances and 'Riverboat Trips' in January 1947. See Owen Bryce, 'Hot Club of London News', *Jazzology*, 2.1 (January 1947), 32-33.

<sup>126</sup> Lang, *Background of the Blues*, p. 3.

members outnumbered members by eight or nine times. The high proportion of non-member attendees is striking given that the club's membership fee was so low, and offered reduced admission prices at all Hot Club events.<sup>127</sup> Yet very few of the audience chose to make this commitment. Although ticket sales are limited as a source of information about audiences, there is an intriguing parallel here with earlier events. While the Rhythm Clubs' move in the early 1940s towards hosting jam sessions had transformed them into spaces of swing fandom, the Hot Club of London enacted a further transformation, drawing large audiences and youthful 'jitterbugs' towards the music of turn-of-the-century New Orleans.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have attempted to reassess the early development of the New Orleans revival in Britain through the activities and background of the band that is commonly held to have pioneered the spread of the revivalist movement: George Webb's Dixielanders. Despite the merits in existing histories that highlight the novel disjunction between the musical culture of early-twentieth-century New Orleans and 1940s suburban London, these writings rarely take into account the extent to which both sounds and written criticism circulated internationally before and during World War II. The pre-war Rhythm Club movement and nascent specialist jazz magazines provided a space for both British and American ideas about jazz. Yet, while critical and scholarly interest in New Orleans continued apace through the early 1940s in the United States, in Britain this progress was slower. Consequently, the Dixielanders were not a 'citadel of retrogression', as critic Steve Voce has argued: this description is more fitting of later revivalist musicians. Instead, the Dixielanders remained

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<sup>127</sup> Owen Bryce, 'Hot Club of London News', *Jazzology*, 1.12 (December 1946), 32-34.

remarkably catholic in their musical tastes, and retained close links with musicians and institutions more usually associated with 1940s British swing.<sup>128</sup>

The discrepancy between the critical tenets of revivalism and the activities of the Dixielanders themselves as evidenced in surviving documentary sources and recordings demands that we reconsider our broader understanding of jazz revivalism. Scholars have often supposed a straightforward link between revivalism as manifested in discourse and revivalist performance in specific historical contexts. The ‘factional wars’ in which revivalist criticism has engaged encourage scholars to present the movement as a rigid ideology subscribed to by musicians and enthusiasts alike, impervious to the wider world. Yet this approach ignores ways in which the discursive and the performative frequently diverge in response to broader social, cultural, or political pressures. For the Dixielanders and their contemporaries, one factor above all others defined musical life: the Second World War. Revivalist ideals, particularly those regarding the construction of authentic, non-commercial performance spaces, were well suited to respond to the otherwise debilitating impact of the war on the entertainment industry.

But most of all, positioning the Dixielanders within their wider contemporary cultures of semi-professional musical performance demonstrates the need to rethink our understanding of revivalism as a fundamentally regressive movement. Jazz performance in 1940s Britain certainly engaged with the past, be it the halcyon days of the pre-war Rhythm Clubs or Edwardian riverside leisure culture. Yet in many cases it was revivalist music making that provided the tonic to this nostalgia. What

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<sup>128</sup> Steve Voce, ‘George Webb: Pianist whose Work inspired the Trad-Jazz Boom of the 1950s’, *The Independent*, 18 June 2010, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/george-webb-pianist-whose-work-inspired-the-trad-jazz-boom-of-the-1950s-2004820.html>> [accessed 13 December 2017].

early revivalists saw in the music of New Orleans, then, offered a template for the continued growth, dissemination, and transformation of national jazz culture.

### III. 'Those Songs are Gonna be Sung All Over this World': Josh White, Big Bill Broonzy, and the Politics of 'Folk Blues' in Early Postwar Britain, 1943-51

On 6 March 1944, the BBC Home Service broadcast *The Man Who Went To War*. This 'ballad opera' tells the story of Johnny, a soldier called up to fight abroad. While Johnny is keen to 'do his bit', his wife Sally struggles with the pressures of the Home Front. She juggles a job in munitions and managing the family home, while enduring sleepless nights in air-raid shelters. When their house is destroyed by enemy action, the family is forced to rely on the charity of their neighbours to rebuild their lives. *The Man Who Went To War* is a morale-boosting tale of 'Blitz spirit', and would have resonated with many listeners' experiences of the conflict. Surprisingly, this contemporary British drama was in fact recorded and produced by the BBC's office in New York, and written and performed by an African American cast. The script was by Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes, and starred a coterie of leading black actors and musicians including Paul Robeson, Ethel Waters, Canada Lee, and Osceola Archer. Additional non-diegetic music was performed by the Hall Johnson Gospel Choir, blues duo Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, and the blues singer and guitarist Josh White.

White's musical interludes drew on a range of African American folksongs, including ballads like 'John Henry', spirituals like 'Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child', and blues standards like 'How Long, How Long Blues', with subtle textual variations to fit the dramatic context. For example, White reformulates the song 'John Henry' – a ballad about a 'steel drivin' ' railroad builder – into a rousing song about a munitions worker who sets the pace of production in the factory:

*Now that my country's fighting / And we have gone to war,  
I'm determined to get this production out / Cause that's what we workers are  
for!*

[...]



*Everybody join with me / And everybody lend a hand  
Cause we've got to push them Fascists back / And make the Nazis  
understand.*<sup>1</sup>

*The Man Who Went To War* was a clear gesture of transatlantic solidarity in wartime. This superimposition of African American music onto a foreign context demonstrates a fundamental dualism in understandings of African American music at this time. While genres like the blues, spirituals, and other types of African American folksong were 'rooted' in the unique social and cultural experiences of their creators, they also had the capacity to be mobile, to resonate across boundaries of race and nation. While the drama proceeded, in Robeson's words, 'in the way that is natural to us [...] [through] the words and the songs that Negroes sing', Hughes's drama projects African American song as an arbiter of Allied, western democracy. As Johnny proclaims in the closing scene of the drama: 'those songs are gonna be sung all over this world'.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, I argue that the simultaneous 'rootedness' and mobility of African American music evident in *The Man Who Went To War* was central to the developing reception of the blues in Britain during the early postwar period. While British jazz enthusiasts had previously identified the blues as a specific category of jazz typified by female vocalists with jazz ensemble backings, they increasingly began to associate the term with male guitarists playing traditional repertoire. Heard as a form of 'Negro folksong', such 'folk blues' began to circulate among British jazz enthusiasts during the mid-1940s, both on record and in print. Increasingly understood as a historic root of jazz, the blues was recognised as unmediated expression, evocative of rural black culture. These interpretations often drew on romantic tropes that positioned the blues as a tradition with distinct racial characteristics. At the same time, the international circulation of blues and other forms of African American folksong transformed them into vehicles for critiquing

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<sup>1</sup> Langston Hughes, 'The Man Who Went To War', American Folklife Center, Alan Lomax Collection AFC 2004/004, MS04.01.12.

<sup>2</sup> Hughes, 'The Man Who Went To War'.

racial inequality and symbols of international solidarity and affinity. *The Man Who Went To War* is one example of this.

This chapter uses British blues appreciation and reception as a prism through which to trace the blues's 'rootedness' and mobility, and to consider how these ideas informed the British reception of two of the first African American blues musicians to tour the United Kingdom: Josh White and Big Bill Broonzy. I begin by examining British encounters with African American folksong on record and in print during the 1940s, before turning to the activities and reception of White and Broonzy during their first British tours in 1950 and 1951 respectively.

### **'Folk blues' and the exploration of African American folksong in 1940s Britain**

The New Orleans 'revival' movement of the early 1940s prompted many British jazz enthusiasts to trace the origins of jazz's defining musical characteristics. Although much scholarly and critical attention was focused on the musicians and musical atmosphere of early twentieth-century New Orleans, enthusiasts also became interested in the wider topic of 'Negro folksong'. This body of music was divided into two categories, sacred and secular, with spirituals and gospel hymn traditions in the former category and field-hollers, work-songs, and the blues in the latter.

Although earlier writing on the blues had depicted it as a distinct subcategory of jazz, postwar writing would increasingly focus on the idea of the blues as a broader sensibility integral to African American vernacular music as a whole. Writing in *The PL Yearbook of Jazz* in 1946, critic and record collector Max Jones highlights how the blues possessed 'a wider meaning which embraces several kinds of American Negro song, without regard to their precise musical construction.'<sup>3</sup> Blues under this new definition, which I will refer to as 'folk blues', was perceived to draw heavily on the musical characteristics of other secular African American folksong categories, but was itself understood as the distillation of the fundamental characteristics of

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<sup>3</sup> Max Jones, 'On Blues', in *The PL Yearbook of Jazz*, ed. by Albert McCarthy (London: Editions Poetry London, 1946), pp. 72-107 (p. 75).

African American vernacular music in a solo vocal form.<sup>4</sup> Jones describes the blues's 'expressive intonation' and 'peculiarities of timbre', which he regarded as 'survivals' from Africa, acknowledging that these traits 'can be found in a great deal of the Afro-American music which preceded jazz'.<sup>5</sup>

What Jones found most notable in the blues was its capacity to provide an expressive outlet for its performers' lives and experiences. Folk blues encapsulated both the concerns of the individual and the wider African American community. While the blues drew from 'scraps of verse and melody known to the community as a whole', Jones argues, blues singers created their songs

by means of shades of pronunciation too fine to indicate with words, by shifting stresses [...] [and] by resorting to a hundred and one tricks that seem to come naturally to Negro folk-singers[.] [T]hey are able to make each song-line different, and each performance a new experience [...] Every singer has his own version of a tune and a personal style of improvising.<sup>6</sup>

The blues's key themes, to Jones's mind, were 'an individual's comment on feelings and events connected with earthly existence'. These included:

the exploits of [black] folk heroes and memorable events in local history[;]  
[...] natural and man-made disasters – floods, cyclones, slumps in farming, the depression, the boll-weevil plague, the war, race riots, lynchings, even notorious miscarriages of justice like the Scottsboro trial. And songs of the

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<sup>4</sup> I have chosen to use the term 'folk blues' not only because Jones uses it in several instances in his article 'On Blues', but more importantly because it signals the interpretative move towards understanding the blues as a form of folksong, which is the focus of my enquiry here. This is distinct from the use of the term 'folk blues' in promotional material, record criticism, and blues scholarship from the 1960s, where 'folk blues' became a common term for a more intimate, acoustic blues performance style marketed as an alternative to 'urban' or 'electric' blues and R&B. See Roberta Freund Schwartz, *How Britain Got The Blues: The Transmission and Reception of American Blues Style in the United Kingdom* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 145-163; Ulrich Adelt, 'Black, White and Blues: Racial Politics of Blues Music in the 1960s' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Iowa, 2007), pp. 84-129.

<sup>5</sup> Jones, 'On Blues', pp. 74-75. Here Jones is influenced by anthropologist and jazz critic Ernest Borneman, whose 1944 serialised writings in the American magazine *Record Changer* described the apparent propensity amongst African musical cultures for syncopation, variation, and non-standard melodic inflections. Borneman's writings were also published as a standalone pamphlet in Britain in 1946. See Ernest Borneman, *A Critic Looks at Jazz* (London: Jazz Music Books, 1946), pp. 10-11.

same kind have been composed about Joe Turner, John Henry, Railroad Bill [...] and many another [sic] mighty figure of Southern history or mythology.<sup>7</sup> At the heart of Jones's understanding of folk blues was the idea that it registered the unique social and cultural status of African Americans. 'The music is unique', observed Jones; 'nothing like it [exists] outside America or among white U.S. communities, and it has been aptly styled "Afro-American."' Moreover, the brutal terror of slavery meant that it was inevitable that the music of Africans on American soil 'carried a note of protest', one that was 'most often covert [...] voicing the singer's discontent and even his awareness of better conditions existing elsewhere.'<sup>8</sup> Writing a year later in 1947, Albert McCarthy and Denis Preston would likewise observe that 'Afro American folksong' came into being through successive generations of contact between African slaves and their white American enslavers. From the earliest slaves' disparate tribal cultures grew a 'universal African heritage', providing a 'loose-textured cultural background' that was subsequently blended with European hymnody and ballad songs.<sup>9</sup> These writers' observations on folk blues and African American folksong were prescient: writing in 1963, critic LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka] conceptualises African American music in similar terms, as its creators' attempts to make sense of their unique position relative to white American society.<sup>10</sup>

British jazz enthusiasts wishing to take their interest in African American folksong further had a surprisingly large number of textual sources at their disposal. A number of printed folksong collections compiled in the United States during the 1920s and 1940s were circulating in Britain by the end of the Second World War. These included Howard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson's *The Negro and His Songs* (1923) and *Negro Workaday Songs* (1926), Carl Sandberg's *American Songbag*

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<sup>6</sup> Jones, 'On Blues', p. 82.

<sup>7</sup> Jones, 'On Blues', p. 77.

<sup>8</sup> Jones, 'On Blues', p. 75.

<sup>9</sup> Albert McCarthy and Denis Preston, 'The Poetry of American Negro Folksong', in *Jazzbook 1947*, ed. by Albert McCarthy (London: Editions Poetry London, 1947), pp. 7-17 (p. 8).

(1927), and Robert W. Gordon's *Folk-Songs of America* (1938). Although published in the United States, the international reach of many major English language publishers meant that many of these texts were available to purchase in Britain.<sup>11</sup> An important British source, too, was A. L. Lloyd's *Corn on the Cob*, a pamphlet-length compilation that drew extensively on these American predecessors. Most influential on critics like Jones and McCarthy, however, was the work of the John A. Lomax and his son, Alan Lomax. Although the Lomaxes had published folksong transcriptions following the pattern of established folksong scholarship, they became far better known for the field recordings they collected during their research in the Southern United States which were deposited in the Archive of American Folksong at the Library of Congress.<sup>12</sup> Despite being held by an American archival institution, the Lomaxes' field recordings were heard in Britain. In 1938, the BBC broadcast a twelve-part series entitled 'I Hear America Singing' on the National Programme,<sup>13</sup> written by the British broadcaster and jazz enthusiast Alistair Cooke, who was then working for the BBC's New York Office. Intending the series to be 'a history of the United States through its songs', Cooke had approached Alan Lomax to obtain copies of field recordings held in the Archive of American Folk Song.<sup>14</sup> Lomax provided thirty-two recordings, nineteen of which were African American field

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<sup>10</sup> LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow, 1963), p. ix.

<sup>11</sup> It appears to have been common for transatlantic publishing houses to advertise American texts in Britain at special import prices. In a 1945 review of the Lomaxes' *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, for instance, Stanley Dance noted that the book (published by Macmillan) had not been published in the UK, but 'before the war had been listed in the American section of their catalogue at 16/-.' Wartime restrictions halted these arrangements temporarily, but texts published before the war would still likely have been in circulation amongst specialist retailers, critics and enthusiasts. See Stanley Dance, 'Book Review: Negro Folk Songs as Sung By Lead Belly', in *A Tribute to Huddie Ledbetter*, ed. by Max Jones and Albert McCarthy (London: Jazz Music Books, 1945), pp. 17-19.

<sup>12</sup> The Lomaxes' best-known conventional folklore publication was the 1934 *American Ballads and Folksongs*. McCarthy and Preston, writing in 1947, would credit 'the sterling work of John and Alan Lomax', noting how the pair had 'travelled thousands of miles through the Southern States, noting every manifestation of Negro folksong, and preserving on wax such dying arts as ring-shout and worksong.' See McCarthy and Preston, 'The Poetry of American Negro Folksong', pp. 16-17.

<sup>13</sup> The programme ran on a weekly basis from 5 July to 20 September 1938.

hollers, railroad songs, and traditional ballads collected during the Lomaxes' visits to prisons in Texas, Mississippi, and Alabama between 1933 and 1937.<sup>15</sup> In 1942, too, the Archive of American Folk Song released a series of 78 rpm albums based on their collections. The third and fourth albums in this series, entitled 'Afro-American Spirituals, Worksongs and Ballads' (AAFS 3) and 'Afro-American Blues and Game Songs' (AAFS 4) respectively, drew on recordings collected by John Lomax during his 1930s field trips, as well as subsequent trips made by Alan Lomax into the Mississippi Delta during 1941 and 1942. Although these records were not commercially distributed and had to be ordered directly from the Library of Congress, copies appear to have made their way into the hands of collectors; both Max Jones and Albert McCarthy quoted from the liner notes to these albums in their postwar writings on the blues and work songs.<sup>16</sup>

The Lomaxes' interest in African American folksong formed part of a larger belief that America's diverse folk traditions were being eroded by mass technology and commercial popular culture. The two folklorists scoured the South, seeking to document and preserve the fading remnants of black folksong traditions. They identified rural plantations and prisons, areas that were heavily segregated and where the potential for cultural cross-contamination would be limited, as locations that

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<sup>14</sup> Letter, Alistair Cooke to Herbert Putnam, 1 June 1938, American Folklife Center, John A. and Alan Lomax Papers, AFC 1933/001, Box 4, Folder 134.

<sup>15</sup> 'Song Recordings Requested by Alistair Cooke for British Broadcasting Corporation Series of Programs on American Song', c. 2 June 1938, American Folklife Center, Correspondence File: British Broadcasting Corporation. These recordings provided the basis for a further BBC series, entitled 'The Negro Sings', produced in 1939. See Letter, Felix Greene to Harold Spivacke, 5 October 1938, American Folklife Center, John A. and Alan Lomax Papers, AFC 1933/001, Box 4, Folder 138.

<sup>16</sup> It is not entirely clear how Jones and McCarthy obtained copies of these recordings. Later British blues collectors and critics like Paul Oliver working in the 1950s and 60s would obtain these recordings through the United States Information Service Library at the American Embassy in London. See Christian O'Connell, *Blues, How Do You Do?: Paul Oliver and the Transatlantic Story of the Blues* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), p. 33. This service was not established until 1953, however. Another possibility is that Jones and McCarthy obtained these albums through contacts at the BBC. The Corporation had been quick to obtain the AAFS albums as they were released, offering in exchange copies of their own collections of British and Irish folk music. This exchange continued into the 1950s, with the BBC obtaining twenty albums from the AAFS series. See Letter, Marie T.

offered the best chance of finding historic folksong traditions preserved intact.<sup>17</sup> At Parchman, Mississippi, and Angola, Louisiana in 1933, the Lomaxes recorded a variety of work-songs and hollers. These, the Lomaxes asserted, demonstrated the functional roots of black folksong in manual labour, and the continuing relevance of folksong performance to those who found themselves on the bottom rung of American society. But perhaps their greatest discovery was their encounter with the singer and guitarist Huddie Ledbetter, more widely known as ‘Lead Belly’, who was in 1933 serving time for attempted murder at Angola State Penitentiary. Born in 1889 in rural Louisiana, Lead Belly was an accomplished singer, guitarist, and concertina player by his teens, but had spent much of his life in prison from 1915 onwards.<sup>18</sup> Styling himself the ‘king of the twelve-string guitar’, he had an extensive repertoire of folksongs and a grating tenor voice that cut across his equally strident guitar accompaniments. The Lomaxes made eleven recordings of the singer in 1933, returning to Louisiana for a further session with him the following year.<sup>19</sup> Following Lead Belly’s release from prison in August 1934, the singer began a brief and often fractious professional relationship with the Lomaxes, accompanying them on lecture tours that saw him attain the status of a minor celebrity amongst folksong enthusiasts and the artistic and intellectual elites of the American East Coast.

The Lomaxes’ interest in Lead Belly played a significant role in critical approaches to African American folksong. They cast the singer as the living embodiment of the elusive folksong traditions that they had initially captured on disc. Scholar Benjamin Filene sees this development in the Lomaxes’ activity as the crafting of a ‘cult of authenticity’. By shifting the emphasis onto the singer rather than the songs themselves, Filene argues, the Lomaxes

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Slocombe to Duncan Emrich, 23 August 1949, American Folklife Center, BBC Collection of Folk Music of the British Isles and Ireland, AFC 1950/032.

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2000), pp. 50-51.

<sup>18</sup> John Szwed, *The Man Who Recorded The World: A Biography of Alan Lomax* (London: Arrow Books, 2010), pp. 44-46.

<sup>19</sup> Szwed, *The Man Who Recorded the World*, pp. 44-46, 59-60.

produced a web of criteria for determining what a 'true' folk singer looked and sounded like and a set of assumptions about the importance of *being* a 'true' folk singer.<sup>20</sup>

The Lomaxes bolstered Lead Belly's apparent musicological appeal – that is, his extensive knowledge of folksong repertoire and direct, untutored performance style – with a more alluring image that played on contemporary stereotypes of blackness as 'other'. For both the Lomaxes and their white folksong enthusiast audiences Lead Belly's earthy, visceral singing and playing echoed the singer's purportedly unrestrained and at times dangerous personality. Audiences were titillated by stories of his earlier crimes, and John Lomax spoke frequently of his fear that Lead Belly would one day 'turn' on him.<sup>21</sup> Interpretative fantasies surrounding Lead Belly's blackness would play a key role in jazz enthusiasts' view of folksong on both sides of the Atlantic, too. In a 1946 Jazz Sociological Society pamphlet entitled *Tribute to Huddie Ledbetter*, compiled by Max Jones and Albert McCarthy, the American 'hot' collector and critic William Russell described Lead Belly's voice as

rich in provincial accent and racial quality [...] [representing] the most primitive type of Afro-American singing [...] far removed from Western musical culture.<sup>22</sup>

The 'cult of authenticity' crafted by the Lomaxes and other writers in their representations of Lead Belly can be seen as part of what Karl Hagstrom Miller has termed a 'folkloric paradigm' emerging in the reception of American vernacular music during the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> Folklorists' growing interest in documenting what they heard to be distinctively 'American' folk culture – as opposed to tracing the vestiges of 'Old World' traditions like the English ballad – brought about a transformation in attitudes towards the expression of racial identity

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<sup>20</sup> Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, p. 49.

<sup>21</sup> Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, pp. 59-62.

<sup>22</sup> William Russell, quoted in Charles Edward Smith, 'King of the 12-String Guitar', in *A Tribute to Huddie Ledbetter*, ed. by Max Jones and Albert McCarthy (London: Jazz Music Books, 1946), pp. 4-6 (p. 5).



in music. While earlier popular forms of entertainment such as minstrelsy conveyed 'black music' through the performance of sounds and gestures that associated with stereotypes of African Americans, folksong scholarship asserted that African American musicians *embodied* the perceived musical characteristics of blackness. This approach rendered musical style and racial identity immutable.<sup>24</sup> This is problematic, as Miller explains:

Focusing on a core black culture inevitably pushes to the periphery sounds and interpretations that do not sufficiently preserve collective memory but may nevertheless be meaningful sources of pleasure, pay, and political power.

Black Americans were never limited to a cultural life that drew on only the traditions and folkways signifying communalism, however rich these traditions were and continue to be.<sup>25</sup>

Depictions of Lead Belly as an untutored storehouse of black folksong, for instance, were a selective reading of his career. Despite his rural upbringing, he had spent many years performing in the bars and clubs of first Shreveport and then New Orleans. As theatre studies scholar Paige McGinley has pointed out, too, Lead Belly was well versed in the conventions of the vaudeville stage: after ending his working relationship with the Lomaxes, he began advertising himself as a multi-talented theatrical entertainer, complementing his encyclopediac knowledge of ballads and blues with a tap-dance and 'buck and wing' routine. Lead Belly's professional versatility was often ignored by folksong enthusiasts, or framed as capitulations to the entertainment economy that were not representative of the singer's 'true' musical persona.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, it is important to recognise the way in which ascendancy of the 'folkloric paradigm', although emerging first in folklore studies, became intertwined

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<sup>23</sup> Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 3-6. For 'cult of authenticity', see Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, p. 49.

<sup>24</sup> Miller, *Segregating Sound*, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> Miller, *Segregating Sound*, p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> Paige McGinley, *Staging the Blues: From Tent Shows to Tourism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 84-85.

with jazz revivalism and ‘hot’ record collecting. Both John and Alan Lomax had initially viewed jazz as synonymous with the commercial mass culture that they perceived to be eroding folksong traditions. John Lomax held to this view for the rest of his life, but Alan began to change his mind after meeting Alistair Cooke in 1938 to discuss lending folksong recordings to the BBC.<sup>27</sup> Cooke encouraged Alan to attend a performance by the New Orleans pianist and composer Jelly Roll Morton, who was at that point resident in Washington DC and performing at the Music Box on U Street. Soon after, Lomax staged an extensive oral history recording session with Morton, exploring his music and reminiscences of turn-of-the-century New Orleans. Recalling the sessions in his 1951 biography of Morton, *Mister Jelly Roll*, Lomax describes how Morton’s playing evoked

Names of friends long dead and of honkey-tonks [sic] quiet for a half century, songs and tunes and precise musical styles forgotten by everyone but Morton [...] As the legend grew and flowered over the keyboard of that Congressional grand piano, the back seats of the hall filled with ghostly listeners – figures dressed in Mardi Gras costumes, fancy prostitutes in their plumes and diamonds [...] cable-armed black longshoremen from the riverfront [...] jazz-men of every complexion playing a solid background on their horns – for this was their legend that Jelly Roll was weaving at the piano, a legend of the painful and glorious flowering of hot jazz in which they had all played a part.<sup>28</sup>

This description reveals Alan Lomax’s emergent realisation that jazz was underpinned by the folklife of New Orleans’s multiple African American communities, an idea that would be pursued in more depth by jazz revivalists like Charles Edward Smith and Frederic Ramsey in *Jazzmen* (see chapter 2). Importantly, too, Lomax’s encounter with Morton mirrored that of his father’s earlier encounter with Lead Belly in 1933: an African American musician, then sinking into obscurity,

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<sup>27</sup> See Szwed, *The Man Who Recorded The World*, p. 122; Marybeth Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues: Black Voices, White Visions* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007), pp. 94-95.

unlocked for a receptive white listener an entire musical tradition through his performance.

While Alan Lomax was beginning to apply the ‘folkloric’ approaches he was familiar with to professional jazz musicians whom he met and recorded, British jazz enthusiasts and collectors would increasingly adapt their record collecting activities in ways that mirrored the changing priorities of folksong scholarship and folksong collecting in the field.<sup>29</sup> By July 1945, Max Jones and Rex Harris were receiving so many enquiries about ‘race’ records on American labels to the *Melody Maker*’s ‘Collectors’ Corner’ that the two critics instigated a semi-regular series of articles entitled ‘Off the Race Lists’. The first article examined the recordings of the Texas blues guitarist Blind Lemon Jefferson, with subsequent columns focusing on other male singer-guitarists of the 1920s and 30s, including Peetie Wheatstraw, Barbecue Bob, Papa Charlie Jackson, and the pianist Leroy Carr. Each instalment offered a brief biography of the musician in question and a discography of their recordings, a remarkable feat given that the vast majority of these recordings were unavailable in Britain.<sup>30</sup> The unavailability of these recordings, together with the apparent obscurity of their performers, lent themselves to interpretation as akin to a folklorists’

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<sup>28</sup> Alan Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll: The Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole and ‘Inventor of Jazz’* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1950), pp. xiii-xv; Szwed, *The Man Who Recorded the World*, pp. 121-125.

<sup>29</sup> Following his recordings of Morton, Lomax would also record other jazz and blues musicians of Morton’s generation, including the boogie-woogie pianists Albert Ammons, Meade Lux Lewis, and James P. Johnson, blues harmonica player Sonny Terry, and blues composer W. C. Handy. See American Folklife Center, Alan Lomax 1938 Library of Congress Sessions Collection, AFC 1938/011; and John Hammond and Alan Lomax Recordings of Blues and Jazz Musicians, AFC 1939/008.

<sup>30</sup> Max Jones and Rex Harris’s ‘Off the Race Lists’ articles can be found in the following ‘Collectors’ Corner’ Columns: ‘Collectors’ Corner’ [Blind Lemon Jefferson], *Melody Maker*, 28 July 1945, p. 4; [Peetie Wheatstraw – Part 1], *Melody Maker*, 12 January 1946, p. 4; [Peetie Wheatstraw – Part 2], *Melody Maker*, 26 January 1946, p. 4; [Papa Charlie Jackson], *Melody Maker*, 20 July 1946, p. 4; [Barbecue Bob – Part 1], *Melody Maker*, 30 November 1946, p. 8; [Barbecue Bob – Part 2], *Melody Maker*, 7 December 1946, p. 8; [Leroy Carr – Part 1], *Melody Maker*, 31 May 1947, p. 6; [Leroy Carr – Part 2], *Melody Maker*, 7 June 1947, p. 6. Other jazz periodicals published discographies of ‘race’ artists at this time. See, for example: Albert McCarthy and Ralph Venables, ‘Discography of Texas Alexander’, *Jazz Music*, 3.1 (1946), 20-22.

discovery of living folk culture, similar to Lomax's chance encounter with Jelly Roll Morton or his father's with Lead Belly a decade earlier.

Importantly, there is some slippage between Jones and Harris's use of the term 'race record' and its more familiar use for recordings made from roughly 1920 onwards for African American consumers. American 'race' catalogues were astonishingly varied, including everything from female blues vocalists and jazz ensembles to solo ballad singers, rural 'jug' bands, and evangelical sermons.<sup>31</sup> For Jones and Harris, however, the terms 'race artist' and 'race record' appear to have referred to a particular segment of American catalogues: solo male singers recorded during the 1920s and 30s who accompanied themselves on guitar. Jones and Harris distinguish Jefferson's recordings from jazz and 'classic' blues singers, hearing his records as examples of 'unformalised blues, sung by folk artist[s] of distinction.' Pre-empting his 1946 chapter 'On Blues', Jones asserted that 'race' records more broadly provided a glimpse of jazz's 'essential [...] elements[:] accent [...] timbre [...] [and] instinctive rhythmic accompaniment.'<sup>32</sup>

Jazz and blues historians' interest in male guitarists who recorded in the 1920s and 30s as both the epitome of the blues and representative of jazz's 'folk' roots involves a certain degree of historical revisionism, as David Ake has pointed out. While male guitarists have often been regarded as emblematic of the blues's roots, many female singers' careers on the vaudeville stage and in the recording studio predated the recording activities of their male counterparts.<sup>33</sup> Ultimately, two formative influences on British enthusiasts' reception of 'race' records can be ascertained. First, Jones and Harris's focus on male guitarists mirrored an existing trend in American jazz writing. The 1943 publication *The Jazz Record Book*, by

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<sup>31</sup> William Howland Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Public Memory, 1890-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 109-134; Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: Amistad, 2005), pp. 27-38.

<sup>32</sup> Jones and Harris, 'Collectors' Corner' [Blind Lemon Jefferson]. As early as 1941, McCarthy had observed that 'race' recordings constituted 'the purest form of Negro music'. See Albert McCarthy, 'About Dodds', *Melody Maker*, 1 March 1941, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> David Ake, 'Jazz Historiography and the Problem of Louis Jordan', in *Jazz Cultures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 42-61 (pp. 50-51).

American jazz collectors Frederic Ramsey and Charles Edward Smith, maintained the convention of splitting female blues singers and boogie-woogie piano from instrumental, ensemble-performed jazz, but it also made a further distinction between female blues singers and ‘folk’ blues, reviewing in a separate section the recordings of three male singer-guitarists: Lead Belly, and the ‘Mississippi blues’ guitarists Tommy McClennan and Big Bill Broonzy. These musicians, Ramsey and Smith argued, encapsulated a specific category of ‘folk’ blues, described as ‘less sophisticated in content’, with a more salient connection to African American rural music making.<sup>34</sup> But more importantly, Jones’s ‘race’ record columns effectively reframe commercially produced and disseminated recordings as examples of ‘folk blues’, and professional performers as authentic ‘folksingers’. This reinterpretation of commercial recordings as folksong artefacts akin to field recordings may have been precipitated in part by the release of the Archive of American Folk Song recordings on disc after 1942. Although these recordings were not commercially distributed or marketed in Britain during this period, knowledge of their existence and the possibility that they could be acquired by collectors, was an instance of the same reframing process, albeit in reverse: archival folksong recordings captured in

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<sup>34</sup> Charles Edward Smith and Frederic Ramsey, Jr., *The Jazz Record Book* (New York: Smith & Durrell, 1943), pp. 86-89. Rudi Blesh makes a similar distinction to that of Ramsey and Smith in *The Jazz Record Book* in his 1946 study *Shining Trumpets* distinguishing ‘classic blues’, a female-dominated category, from ‘archaic blues’, an earlier and male-dominated category typified by male guitarists. See Rudi Blesh, *Shining Trumpets: A History of Jazz*, 2nd edn (London: Cassell, 1958), p. 110. Earlier revivalist jazz writing such as *Jazzmen*, pays little attention to male blues guitarists. Lang, too, seems to have been relatively slow to catch on to male guitarists as blues exponents, at least in print. Although his initial ‘Background of the Blues’ essay highlights a single record by ‘Big Bill Broonzy’ (sic), the fact that Lang does not distinguish Broonzy from any of the other musicians he discussed suggests that Lang had not actually heard any of Broonzy’s records at the time, and did not anticipate that they would require any divergence from his existing categories. See Iain Lang, ‘Background of the Blues’, in *The Saturday Book, 1941-42: A New Miscellany*, ed. by Leonard Russell (London: Hutchinson, 1942), pp. 330-357 (pp. 356). Although it is difficult to track the availability of American-published books in wartime Britain, Albert McCarthy had evidently seen a copy of *The Jazz Record Book* by early 1943, while by mid-1944 critic and collector Ralph Venables was offering copies of the book for sale or exchange alongside Ramsey and Smith’s *Jazzmen*, Charles Delaunay’s *Hot Discographie*, and Panassié’s *The Real Jazz* in the *Melody Maker*. See Bill Elliott and Jeff Aldam, ‘Collectors’ Corner’, *Melody Maker*, 23 January 1943, p. 4; Bill Elliott and Rex Harris, ‘Collectors’ Corner’, *Melody Maker*, 10 June 1944, p. 4.

the field were re-contextualised as recordings that could be collected, catalogued, and appraised by the connoisseur jazz listener.

In the years immediately following the Second World War, British jazz enthusiasts became increasingly interested in African American folksong traditions. They began to understand the blues as a form of folksong, one that underpinned jazz and provided a unique glimpse into the music's roots in African American culture and experience. Most crucial among these was the blues's capacity to depict the social position of its performers through its lyrical themes. Approaches to folk blues were influenced by a broader intertwining of folklore scholarship and jazz record collecting during this period. Jones's and McCarthy's writings between 1945 and 1947 show the influence of American folklore scholarship, and particularly the work of John and Alan Lomax. The Lomaxes' writings and activities reshaped how encounters with individual performers could serve as a channel through which to access threatened folksong traditions. Consequently, folklorists, critics, and ultimately listeners too, actively played down performers' professional activities and commercial motivations, while their recordings were reframed as examples of an obscure 'folk' culture. The situation was self-reinforcing: a resistance to the urban and professional helped inculcate an idea of 'natural' black musicality, which itself became a yardstick against which all performers and recordings were judged.<sup>35</sup> Yet the allure of folkloric encounters with the African American musical past was not the only impetus for British interest in blues and folksong: critics and enthusiasts were also motivated by a sympathy for leftwing politics. It is therefore to the political meanings of the blues that I will now turn, and the activities of the most well-known exponent of 'political' blues performance, Josh White.

### **The political valency of African American folksong**

Although most jazz fans had little more than a casual familiarity with the Communist Party of Great Britain, the idea espoused by critics and listeners that

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<sup>35</sup> Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, pp. 16-17.

‘authentic’ jazz and African American folksong encapsulated the social circumstances of its creators indicates that most listeners held what can be termed a ‘sociological’ view of jazz. Organisations like the Jazz Sociological Society and the Jazz Appreciation Society had since the early 1940s shared a commitment to elucidating jazz’s status as a politically valent, proletarian art form, creating ‘a powerful identification between authentic jazz appreciation and the left.’<sup>36</sup> Edited by Max Jones and Albert McCarthy, the Jazz Sociological Society’s magazine *Jazz Music* regularly featured articles on the history of slavery, segregation, and African American folksong alongside record reviews and bio-discographies of jazz instrumentalists. Jones and McCarthy recognised that contemporary racial politics were vital to understanding the circumstances in which African American music was produced, and within which African American performers operated. As Jones observed

It has become increasingly clear to us, since “Jazz Music’s” inception, that the average enthusiast’s interest in jazz engenders a like interest in the country which originated it, and in the people who make it [...] [This interest] is surpassed only by his ignorance of current events, political trends, and the incessant racial strife that permeates American life.<sup>37</sup>

Jones wrote a regular column for the magazine entitled ‘U.S. Commentary’ that covered recent political flashpoints. These included riots in Detroit in the Autumn of 1943, segregated housing policy, anti-strike legislation, and what Jones saw as a doctrine of white supremacy at the heart of American society.<sup>38</sup> *Jazz Music* also began to review and publish extracts of contemporary African American literature and letters. The October 1943 issue, for instance, featured Langston Hughes’s ‘Letter

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<sup>36</sup> Kevin Morgan, ‘King Street Blues: Jazz and the Left in Britain in the 1930s-40s’, in *A Weapon in the Struggle: Essays on the Cultural History of British Communism*, ed. by Andy Croft (London: Pluto Press, 1998), pp. 123-141 (p. 130). Although both organisations are certainly worthy of study, my focus in this chapter will primarily be on the Jazz Sociological Society. Morgan’s work traces the similarities, differences, and relationships between the JAS and the JSS.

<sup>37</sup> Max Jones, ‘U.S. Commentary’, *Jazz Music*, 9 (c. July 1943), pp. 10-11, 16.

<sup>38</sup> Max Jones, ‘U.S. Commentary’, *Jazz Music* 2.2 (October 1943), pp. 26-27. Other contributors provided one-off articles on similar themes.

to the South', an acerbic critique that highlighted the absurdity of Southern segregation in light of the nation's opposition to European fascism and current involvement in the global conflict.<sup>39</sup> Jones and McCarthy also attempted to prepare a 'pamphlet on the history of colour prejudice in the U.S.A.' Although this pamphlet ultimately never seems to have materialised, it is likely that the extended coverage of contemporary racial politics in the magazine give a flavour of the pamphlet's intended contents.<sup>40</sup>

British leftwing politics served as an intersection at which jazz and more conventional folklore scholarship met. Jazz writers often compared African American performance traditions to European folk cultures, in particular Andalusian *cante hondo*. Writing in 1946, McCarthy explains how

Both [jazz and *cante hondo*] were the creations of a specific section of the community – the dispossessed, despised, *declassé* groups from which so many art forms have arisen [...] it was only natural that the folk products of both groups should be received with disapproval by the bourgeoisie.<sup>41</sup>

Lang also hears parallels to the blues in Andalusian song, observing how both were 'urban folksongs' with 'an amalgam of influences' and were 'despised as the song of prisons, brothels, and slums.'<sup>42</sup> Both Lang and McCarthy followed the lead of A. L. Lloyd, who had written influential articles with a Marxian bent on both English and Spanish folksong traditions for the *William Morris Society Musical Bulletin*. It is

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<sup>39</sup> Langston Hughes, 'Letter to the South', *Jazz Music* 2.2 (October 1943), pp. 24-25. Hughes's letter was reprinted from the *Chicago Defender* of 10 July 1943.

<sup>40</sup> Jones and McCarthy's initial announcement regarding the pamphlet was in one of the first three issues of *Jazz Music*, none of which have survived into the present day. The planned pamphlet was mentioned again in several editorials between issues 4 and 7, although each month the editors complained of further delays to the project and promised that the eventual publication would be even longer and more thorough than previously anticipated. By issue 7, Jones and McCarthy reported that the 'pamphlet' would run to over 50,000 words, an ambitious proposal given contemporary paper rationing. It is possible that *Jazz Music's* coverage of racial politics had initially been intended for the pamphlet, but was then published as standalone articles once it became clear that the pamphlet was no longer viable.

<sup>41</sup> Albert McCarthy, 'The Significance of Leadbelly', in *A Tribute to Huddie Ledbetter*, ed. by Max Jones and Albert McCarthy (London: Jazz Music Books, 1946), p. 16.

<sup>42</sup> Iain Lang, *Background of the Blues* (London: Workers' Music Association, 1943), pp. 13-14.



notable that Lloyd's writings appeared in close proximity to 'sociological' jazz texts: his 1943 pamphlet *The Singing Englishman* was published by the Workers' Music Association as the first pamphlet in their 'Keynote' series, the second instalment of which was Lang's expanded *Background of the Blues*. Other essays by Lloyd were later reprinted by McCarthy and Jones in a 1945 Jazz Sociological Society pamphlet, *Folk: Review of People's Music*. While the comparison between jazz and *cante hondo* is somewhat superficial, and was rarely explored in depth, the close proximity of jazz and folk criticism and publishing in the mid-1940s demonstrates the extent to which progressive politics exposed jazz enthusiasts to a broader range of ideas about the social contexts of jazz and African American folksong.

At the same time, British enthusiasts' awareness of the political valency of jazz, blues, and folksong also had American foundations. The 'Cultural Front', as historian Michael Denning has termed it, was a progressive network of musicians, performers, artists, writers, and critics inspired both by 'Popular Front' policies of the American Left, and the ideals of Roosevelt's 'New Deal' liberalism.<sup>43</sup> The activities of Cultural Front jazz performers, promoters, and audiences correspond to a need to challenge segregation and racial discrimination, both in the local New York City entertainment industry and also across wider American society. This ethos, Denning argues, manifested itself in popular criticism, fundraisers in support of progressive causes, and in the promotion of integrated opportunities for recording and performance.<sup>44</sup> A focal point for Cultural Front jazz and blues performance was Café Society in New York's Greenwich Village, a nightclub founded in 1938 by promoter Barney Josephson that made a point of integration both on the bandstand and amongst the audience.

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<sup>43</sup> Denning describes the relationship between the 'Cultural Front' and broader political climate as the 'extraordinary flowering of arts, entertainment, and thought based on the broad social movement that came to be known as the Popular Front.' See Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1996), p. xvi. For further information on the cultural politics of the American Left, particularly with relation to jazz, see Jonathon Bakan, 'Jazz and the "Popular Front": "Swing" Musicians and the Left-Wing Movement of the 1930s-1940s', *Jazz Perspectives*, 3.1 (2009), 35-56.

<sup>44</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, pp. 335-338.

One musician at the centre of Cultural Front music making was the guitarist and singer Josh White. Born in 1914 in Greenville, South Carolina, White began his musical education as a 'lead boy' for the visually impaired guitarists Blind Man Arnold, Blind Blake and Blind Joe Taggart. From these musicians he learnt not only how to play and sing, but also contemporary dance routines typical of itinerant performers and street musicians. White soon attracted the attention of record label scouts in search of 'race' talent with regional appeal; he made his recording debut accompanying Taggart in 1928 while still a teenager, and began making his own records with ARC two years later. Throughout the 1930s he recorded religious songs with guitar accompaniment as 'the Singing Christian', while releasing blues songs under the name 'Pinewood Tom'. Although a hand injury in 1936 would cause White to retire temporarily from professional music making, by 1939 he had moved to New York and was becoming increasingly active within politically progressive performance circles. White played the character of 'Blind Lemon' – an itinerant bluesman loosely based on Blind Lemon Jefferson – in a Theater Arts Company production titled *John Henry*, which starred concert singer and activist Paul Robeson in the title role.<sup>45</sup>

Throughout the early 1940s, White's repertoire would concentrate on overt political themes, in particular those addressing racial oppression and segregation. In 1940, White teamed up with choral director Leonard de Paur – who had worked on *John Henry* – to record the album *Chain Gang Songs*. Accompanied by a vocal group called the Carolinians and drawing on song texts collected specifically for their themes of protest by leftwing folklorist Lawrence Gellert, the album was a biting critique of black incarceration and forced labour.<sup>46</sup> White followed *Chain*

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<sup>45</sup> For an in-depth biography of White, see Elijah Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000).

<sup>46</sup> Gellert published two compilations of folksongs with clear themes of protest that he reported to have collected 'in the field'. See Lawrence Gellert, *Negro Songs of Protest* (New York: American Music League, 1936); *Me and My Captain: Chain Gang Negro Songs of Protest* (New York: Hours Press, 1939). For a discussion of the accuracy and veracity of Gellert's folksong research, see Steven Garabedian, 'Reds, Whites, and the Blues: Lawrence Gellert, "Negro Songs of Protest", and the

*Gang Songs* in 1941 with the album *Southern Exposure* for the progressive independent record label Keynote, this time featuring songs that he had composed in collaboration with Harlem Renaissance poet Waring Cuney. Through songs like ‘Jim Crow Train’ and ‘Bad Housing Blues’, White and Cuney addressed the systemic inequalities of daily life. Other tracks, such as ‘Uncle Sam Says’ and ‘Defence Factory Blues’, attended to the hypocrisy of segregation within the armed forces while fighting against Fascism abroad. On *Southern Exposure*, the blues was not simply a reflection of African American life and experiences; instead, White offered overt political critiques of American racial inequality. As White’s biographer Elijah Wald has pointed out, although associations between the blues and the expression of the African American condition were already well understood, White offered a step further: in Wald’s words, ‘a repertoire of blues about current events, written from a strong left-wing perspective.’<sup>47</sup>

This was a turning point in White’s career. While his performances and ‘race’ recordings in the 1930s had previously been aimed at the African American popular market, White now performed for integrated, politically progressive audiences. He appeared frequently at Cultural Front venues like Café Society, the Village Vanguard, and supported numerous progressive causes by appearing at benefit concerts. Perhaps most interesting, though, is the way in which the ideals of the Cultural Front manifested themselves in White’s performance. Denning identifies amongst the politically conscious African American musicians of Café Society – and in particular in the work of Josh White – a ‘cabaret blues’ aesthetic, an amalgamation of European political cabaret, American vernacular music traditions, and themes of radical protest, all combined in a performance style that exploited the ‘folkloric’ authenticity of the blues and the intimacy of the nightclub setting.<sup>48</sup>

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Leftwing Folksong Revival of the 1930s and 1940s’, *American Quarterly*, 57.1 (March 2005), 179-206.

<sup>47</sup> Elijah Wald, ‘Josh White and the Protest Blues’, *Living Blues*, 158 (July-August 2001), 36-42, <<http://www.elijahwald.com/joshprotest.html>> [accessed 16 December 2017].

<sup>48</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 338. Perhaps the most well known instance of the ‘cabaret blues’ aesthetic is the song ‘Strange Fruit’, first performed by singer Billie

Denning characterises White's 'cabaret blues' style as a combination of 'clear, light, and rounded vocals, answered by an almost delicate guitar line embellished with choking slides and bends.'<sup>49</sup> Wald, too, has noted the way in which White exploited the intimacy of his performance settings to clothe his political critique with a relaxed, unstudied demeanour:

Friends, fans, and family recall the way [White] could instantly get an audience in the palm of his hand. Cabaret audiences were famous for talking throughout a performance, and there was something magic about the way Josh could quiet them down [...] Time and again, people repeat the same memories: [White's] stance, his right foot up on a box or a chair, the guitar resting on his knee, the lighted cigarette behind his ear surrounding his head with an atmospheric cloud of smoke.<sup>50</sup>

White would also expand his repertoire during the mid-1940s to incorporate popular 'folk' and novelty songs as a contrast to his more polemical material. He adopted songs like 'Waltzing Matilda', and 'The Riddle Song' – an English ballad about 'a cherry that had no stone' – as well as novelty numbers like 'One Meat Ball' and 'The Lass With the Delicate Air'.<sup>51</sup> This combination of 'light' and 'serious' material allowed White to further command his audiences' attention.<sup>52</sup>

By drawing on a range of material – traditional spirituals and blues standards, his own songs of political protest, international folksong, and contemporary popular songs – White created a unique blend of cosmopolitan entertainment that

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Holiday at Café Society. As Denning points out, the song – a chilling meditation on the subject of lynching – draws Holiday's own jazz singing style towards 'the stylized theatrical quality of the cabaret'; Holiday first performed the song at the end of a set in near-total darkness, her face lit by a single spotlight. See Denning, *The Cultural Front*, pp. 342-344.

<sup>49</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, pp. 349-350.

<sup>50</sup> Wald, *Society Blues*, pp. 113-114.

<sup>51</sup> The hook of this latter song was the way in which the lyrics cause the listener to expect that the final word of the line 'the lass with the delicate...' will begin with an 'a', and rhyme with 'lass'.

<sup>52</sup> Regarding White's performances of 'The Riddle Song', Wald observes: 'It worked because it was so simple, and because Josh, rather than trying to make it fancier, emphasized that simplicity. He just presented the lyric, with minimal guitar accompaniment, and its gentleness and the ancient quality of the poetry provided an

nevertheless retained ‘folk’ trappings. In this way, the ‘cabaret blues’ aesthetic at the heart of White’s performances during the early 1940s counters the ‘folkloric paradigm’ identified by Miller in approaches to folksong during this period. With his ‘staged’ persona and wide repertoire, White appears to fit many ‘folkloric’ criteria of authenticity yet also contradict and exceed them. This tension was clearly central to White’s image. The poet and author Langston Hughes, in his liner notes to the album *Songs by Josh White*, reflected that

You could call Josh White the Minstrel of the Blues, except that he is more than a Minstrel of the Blues. The Blues are Negro music, but, although he is a Negro, Josh is a fine folk-singer of anybody’s songs[...] any songs that come from the heart of the people.<sup>53</sup>

Although it is clear that White had many personal experiences of racism, these were not positioned as the impetus for his political compositions. His journey to recognition amongst Cultural Front audiences came through professional performance, not a ‘discovery’ by a folksong authority like John or Alan Lomax. What is more, the sparse, intimate style for which he was renowned leant itself to ‘folk’ repertoire, but was the product of professional craft not unstudied simplicity.

Denning observes that ‘cabaret blues’ performers like White have often been regarded with some scepticism: their involvement with Cultural Front music making is often interpreted as ‘a bizarre union of celebrity culture and political posturing’, rather than as an activity central to their musical identities during this period.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Denning concedes that albums like *Chain Gang Songs* and *Southern Exposure* created a ‘persona’ that White was unable to escape further on in his career.<sup>55</sup> Yet it is also possible to see the interplay between authentic folk and ‘staged’ artifice within the ‘cabaret blues’ aesthetic as a defining characteristic of ‘Cultural Front’ performance. Paige McGinley highlights how although folk blues

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ideal balance to the toughness of his blues songs and the polemics of his topical material.’ Wald, *Society Blues*, p. 116.

<sup>53</sup> Langston Hughes, ‘Josh White Sings Easy’, liner notes to Josh White, *Josh White Sings Easy* (Asch 348, 1944), quoted in Wald, *Society Blues*, p. 117.

<sup>54</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, pp. 324.

was increasingly understood as unmediated, ‘authentic’ expression, folksingers were repeatedly presented in ways that played on the discrepancy between the ‘authentic’ and the ‘staged’.<sup>56</sup> This duality can be observed in White’s own performance aesthetic, but in particular in his performances with Lead Belly during the early 1940s. As well as performing with the Carolinians at Café Society, White began a longstanding performing engagement with Lead Belly at the Village Vanguard in 1942. The two performers complemented each other well: White’s refined voice and carefully-placed guitar accompaniments acted as a neat foil for Ledbetter’s rough-around-the-edges guitar playing and often abrasive voice. But most importantly, the pairing of White and Lead Belly matched the conceptual binary of contemporary folksong interest: Lead Belly was the ‘source’, a ‘primitive’ relic of African American folk traditions discovered in situ by folklorists, while White’s controlled artistry and penchant for biting lyrical criticism highlighted the power a true ‘people’s music’ tradition could have in the hands of a skilled, progressive executant.<sup>57</sup> In other words, whether performances were presented as conscious artistry or unmediated folkloric expression, both involved what McGinley terms ‘theatrical thinking’.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, the ‘authentic’ ideal and its cultivated ‘staging’ are not diametrically opposed, but connected and reflexive. It is precisely this interplay that Hughes appears to be hinting at in his liner notes, and that was integral to White’s musical appeal and critical reception.

British folk blues and folksong enthusiasts do not appear to have entirely grasped these nuances, however. The main source of critical information about Josh White prior to his first British tour in 1950, was a 1945 article entitled ‘Balladeer for America’ by Max Jones. First printed in the Jazz Sociological Society’s pamphlet

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<sup>55</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 357.

<sup>56</sup> McGinley, *Staging the Blues*, p. 84.

<sup>57</sup> Wald, *Society Blues*, pp. 91-94. There is, as McGinley points out, a danger in seeing Lead Belly as ambivalent about politics, an innocent performer in contrast to White’s activism. Indeed, Lead Belly sang his own share of politically charged blues songs. It is perhaps more accurate to see both musicians grappling with (and drawing on) the multiple roles of professional entertainer, ‘folk’ artist, and political activist. See McGinley, *Staging the Blues*, pp. 119-121.

<sup>58</sup> McGinley, *Staging the Blues*, p. 94.

*Folk: Review of People's Music* it was republished after the war in *Jazzbook 1947*. Jones was clearly aware of White's early musical experiences, observing that White 'was in contact with a good deal of Negro deep song' during his childhood and later through his association with Blind Lemon Jefferson. These details clearly suggested to Jones that White could have been initially classed as a 'folksinger' similar to a musician like Lead Belly. Indeed, Jones mistakenly highlights that White had made recordings for Alan Lomax at the Archive of Folk Song.<sup>59</sup> Notably, Jones was also aware of White's more recent activities and career successes, as he highlights the strident political critique of many of White's songs. Surveying the musical and political content of both *Chain Gang Songs* and *Southern Exposure*, Jones notes White's involvement in union meetings and benefit concerts for progressive causes, as well as the stand that the guitarist took against racial prejudice in radio and film:

Josh White's political feelings are not confined to song, but manifest themselves in his private and professional life; he is militant in the struggle against the colour bar which is raised even in New York's entertainment industry [...] More than one stage and radio offer has been turned down by [White] because an 'Uncle Tom' rôle appeared unlikely to redound to anything like the credit of his twelve-and-a-half million Negro compatriots.<sup>60</sup>

At the same time, Jones was highly sceptical of blues that could be construed as 'staged', 'deliberate', or 'self-conscious'. He clearly favoured a 'folkloric' approach, criticising both White's novelty and popular numbers as well as his protest compositions and observing that White was 'no "natural"', his performances exhibiting instead 'studied, extremely self-conscious artistry.'<sup>61</sup> Jones likewise takes a dim view of White's 'silky' vocal tone and a characteristic vocal 'sob' effect, as

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<sup>59</sup> Max Jones, 'Balladeer for America', in *Jazzbook 1947*, ed. by Albert McCarthy (London: Editions Poetry London, 1947), pp. 130-142, (pp. 130, 141). The origins of this error are unclear. White only appears in the AAFS archives once, in a live recording of a concert at the Library of Congress's Coolidge Auditorium in 1940. This was certainly not a 'field recording', however, and it is not clear how Jones would have known about this event in any case.

<sup>60</sup> Jones, 'Balladeer for America', pp. 131-133.

well as the singer's penchant for filling pauses with virtuosic guitar flourishes. These techniques, Jones observes, were 'not the equipment of an untrained folk-singer but are calculated artistic effects, perfectly timed and executed.'<sup>62</sup> Jones's comments hint at a stubborn fetishisation of African Americans' 'innate' music-making and cultural isolation. Unsurprisingly, Jones interprets White's political endeavours, as well as his crafting of a professional, sophisticated style, as a capitulation to outside pressures and an obstruction of the unmediated 'folk' expression that might otherwise be found in the repertoire and performance style of an African American folksinger.

One possible reason for British critics' scepticism towards White's 'cabaret blues' aesthetic and the nuances of Cultural Front music making was the difficulty in obtaining a representative sample of White's recordings. American records could only secure a wide distribution in Britain if the label had a 'tie up' with the British companies EMI or Decca.<sup>63</sup> This meant that large swathes of White's recorded output had little chance of general release. His early 'race' records were recorded for small labels like Melotone, Perfect, and Banner which, although they were technically eligible for international distribution as minor subsidiaries of Columbia Records, were evidently a low priority for international reissue.<sup>64</sup> The same was true of White's avowedly political recordings for Cultural Front independent labels like Keynote. The only recordings available to British companies were a selection of sides White had recorded for American Decca during 1944 and 1945, recordings from a brief stint accompanying the white actress and 'torch singer' Libby Holman in 1942, and the Columbia album *Chain Gang Songs*. The Holman recordings aside, these recordings do in fact provide a fairly representative sample of White's mid-1940s output: *Chain Gang Songs*, although somewhat formal in sound and song

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<sup>61</sup> Jones, 'Balladeer for America', p. 141.

<sup>62</sup> Jones, 'Balladeer for America', p. 135.

<sup>63</sup> Max Jones and Rex Harris, 'Collectors' Corner', *Melody Maker*, 23 March 1946, p. 6.

<sup>64</sup> Indeed, writing in 'Collectors' Corner', Jones was clearly under the impression that these recordings had no such eligibility and could not be released in the UK. See Jones and Harris, 'Collectors' Corner', *Melody Maker*, 23 March 1946, p. 6.



arrangement due to the inclusion of the Carolinians vocal group, was typical of the stridently political themes that could be found on his more celebrated album *Southern Exposure*. White's 1944-45 Decca recordings likewise offer a cross section of the guitarist's live repertoire: he had recorded blues standards like 'Back Water Blues', 'Nobody Knows You When You're Down And Out', and 'Evil Hearted Man'; ballads like 'House of the Rising Sun', 'Frankie and Johnny', and 'John Henry'; political songs like 'Strange Fruit' and 'Beloved Comrade'; and a selection of his novelty and popular folk numbers like 'Molly Malone', 'Waltzing Matilda', 'The Lass With the Delicate Air', and 'The Riddle Song'.<sup>65</sup>

Nevertheless, these records may have confused British critics owing to the extent to which they do not fully capture the two main personae – the 'race' records artist and the political folksinger – that British enthusiasts associated with White. When the *Melody Maker*'s 'Collectors' Corner' ran its annual poll to select American jazz and blues discs for British release in 1946, Max Jones and Rex Harris vetoed outright White's recordings with Holman, and expressed misgivings towards *Chain Gang Songs*'s use of choral arrangements: these were decreed to be 'not jazz enough for a jazz poll'.<sup>66</sup> In each case, these recordings did not meet their expectations of how White ought to be presented: an 'authentic' folksinger or 'race' artist could not perform in conjunction with a white pop singer, and folksongs with

<sup>65</sup> A full list of White's 1944-45 American Decca recordings can be found in Jones and Harris, 'Collectors' Corner', *Melody Maker*, 23 March 1946, p. 6.

<sup>66</sup> While Jones and Harris's prescriptions are somewhat severe, it is also important to acknowledge the need for the 'Collectors' Corner' to stay on the right side of the record companies that they were lobbying for releases. The annual poll inevitably drew a far wider range of responses than record companies were prepared to honour for such a relatively niche audience, and a record nominated for release that then sold poorly would damage jazz enthusiasts' collective bargaining power with British labels. In the case of *Chain Gang Songs*, it is likely that Jones and Harris suspected that these would be of too specialist an interest to attract sufficient sales, and thereby damage the reputation of the 'Collectors' Corner' as a collective voice of British jazz and folksong connoisseurship. Readers placed White's 'House of the Rising Sun'/'Strange Fruit' fifth in the poll, between Lead Belly's recording of 'Alberta' (4th) and Bessie Smith's 'Dying By The Hour' (7th). In first place was Jelly Roll Morton's 'Doctor Jazz'. White's disc did not sell particularly well, and Jones later speculated that Decca held this against jazz collectors in subsequent years. See Max Jones and Rex Harris, 'Jelly-Roll Morton Tops "Collectors' Corner" 1946 Poll', *Melody Maker*, 20 April 1946, p. 2; Max Jones, 'Josh's Conscious Blend of Poetry and Music', *Melody Maker*, 19 August 1950, p. 9.

political overtones should not be formalised and scored for vocal quartet. From the Decca recordings, Jones and Harris recommended that *Melody Maker* readers vote for White's pairing of 'House of the Rising Sun' and 'Strange Fruit', which they clearly believed would offer listeners the best available representation of White's dual folk and political personae. In the event, Jones was still disappointed.

Reviewing the British Decca release of 'House of the Rising Sun' and 'Strange Fruit' in 1947, he lamented that prospective listeners were 'faced with two ballads, one of white origin and the other a very self-conscious creation with studied political overtones.'<sup>67</sup> Even when adopting the personae that he was most renowned for, White still fell foul of British critics' prejudiced misconceptions as to what constituted 'authentic' African American folksong and performance style.

While American audiences relished in the multifaceted nature of White's performance style, British enthusiasts in the mid-1940s heard troubling contradictions. Even though White's formative musical activities and the progressive content of his songs fit well with enthusiasts' growing understanding of African American folksong's development and political valency, key elements of White's performance style and activities were at odds with British critical consensus. What is more, the limited availability of White's recordings in Britain prevented critics and audiences from being able to appraise and contextualise White's music within their knowledge of White's career, and within the development of African American folksong more broadly. Fortunately, in the same way that the nuances of live performance allowed White to build a complex and multifaceted performance aesthetic, his appearance in the UK in the summer of 1950 would refine British attitudes to his music, as well as propagate new ideas about the meaning of folk blues and African American folksong.

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<sup>67</sup> Max Jones and Rex Harris, 'Collectors' Corner', *Melody Maker*, 11 January 1947, p. 8.

### Josh White in Britain, 1950

White opened at the Manchester Hippodrome on 10 July 1950, before making his London debut at the Chiswick Empire the following week.<sup>68</sup> Advertised as ‘America’s Singing Star of Folk Songs, Blues and Ballads’, White was booked as a ‘variety’ act, sandwiched between a comedian and some dancers.<sup>69</sup> He began his first appearance with a rendition of the spiritual ‘There’s A Man Goin’ Round Taking Names’ and followed it with the English folk song ‘The Foggy, Foggy Dew’. Then came his most popular numbers, ‘One Meat Ball’, and ‘Waltzing Matilda’. Finally, for his sole blues number of the evening, White closed with the seductive ‘You Know Baby, What I Want From You’.<sup>70</sup> White appears to have crafted a relatively ‘light’ programme for his British debut, largely eschewing both his earliest ‘race’ repertoire and his overtly political fare. This choice of repertoire arguably fits the broad audience demographic found in variety theatres like the Hippodrome and the Empire, but it also demonstrates the permeability between ‘popular’ and ‘folk’ performance in White’s act.

Despite the populist context of variety theatre, jazz enthusiasts were determined not to miss a rare chance to hear a visiting African American performer. British critics, promoters, and performers attended on multiple occasions, only taking their seats just before White’s twenty-minute set, and leaving the hall straight afterwards.<sup>71</sup> Although it is surprising that these listeners should have gone to such lengths for White’s brief and relatively unsubstantial programme, it is clear that there was an ulterior motive. White was frequently willing to host further performances in his dressing room after his advertised appearances had ended, for a select audience. Writing for *Jazz Journal*, critic Les Pythian recalled these backstage performances as far more impressive:

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<sup>68</sup> Denis Preston, ‘I Sing the Songs of the People’, *Melody Maker*, 15 July 1950, p. 3; ‘Josh White Coming for Stage Tour’, *Melody Maker*, 3 June 1950, p. 1; ‘Josh White Opens His Variety Tour’, *Melody Maker*, 8 July 1950, p. 1.

<sup>69</sup> Max Jones and Sinclair Traill, ‘Collectors’ Corner’, *Melody Maker*, 29 July 1950, p. 9.

<sup>70</sup> Pat Brand, ‘On the Beat’, *Melody Maker*, 22 July 1950, p. 2.

Josh was addicted to these informal gatherings throughout his European tour [...] [He] had held a typical [...] first-house audience enthralled with such numbers as ‘St. James Infirmary’, ‘Molly Malone’, ‘One Meat Ball’, the amusing ‘What’s Everybody Made Of?’, ‘Waltzing Matilda’ and [...] the lovely ‘Riddle Song’. But the things that happened afterwards – with Josh perched high on the back of an old easy-chair, lighted cigarette in its customary place behind his right ear – [...] thrust all else into the background. The ‘atmosphere’ was just about perfect and the recital strictly impromptu. First of all there was a magnificent ‘House of the Rising Sun’ [sic] and this was followed by a spirited treatment of ‘Joshua Fit De Battle Of Jericho’; next came an unforgettable ‘Evil Hearted Man’ [...] then a splendidly relaxed ‘You Know, Baby, [What I Want From You]’ [...] Then came his delightful, well-known version of ‘The Lass With The Delicate Air’ and [...] there was just time for his own favourite number ‘The House I Live In’.<sup>72</sup>

Pythian’s recollections are significant for several reasons. First, he notes how White tailored his repertoire to his audience and performance context. For his larger, main audience, White performed his novelty songs as well as his popular folksong repertoire like ‘Molly Malone’ and ‘Waltzing Matilda’. Backstage, however, White drew far more on his repertoire of blues and African American folksong to cater to the interests of the more discerning listeners who had gathered to hear him. Second, and more importantly, it is clear that White’s cultivated informality, such as the positioning of a cigarette and his posture on his chair, was key to the success of these ‘after hours’ performances. Despite the scepticism that British critics like Max Jones displayed towards White’s repertoire and performance style prior to his arrival in Britain, White was able to use his ‘cabaret blues’ aesthetic to enchant the assembled

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<sup>71</sup> For a list of jazz scene luminaries who attended White’s concerts, see Jones and Traill, ‘Collectors’ Corner’, *Melody Maker*, 29 July 1950, p. 9.

<sup>72</sup> Les Pythian, ‘Beloved Comrade: Some Recollections of Josh White’s Visits to England’, *Jazz Journal*, 4.5 (May 1951), 15, 19. Although published in 1951,

dressing room crowd even though, as Pythian's recollections show, he played songs that earlier critical writings had dismissed like 'House of the Rising Sun' and 'The Lass With The Delicate Air'. Pythian's positive appraisal of these songs most obviously suggests that Pythian was less purist in his attitude toward what constituted 'authentic' folksong than Max Jones. Yet there is also a more provocative possibility: that White was able to assert a competing approach to the notion of authenticity itself through his performance aesthetic. In a live context, White was able to circumvent the preconceptions and biases of his British connoisseur audience by convincing them that the authenticity of his performance lay not in his perceived (in)fidelity to an idealised African American folksong tradition, but in their privileged communion with a live African American performer in an informal setting.

Interestingly, White appears to have shied away from his more polemical songs that dealt with racial discrimination during his first British tour. Instead, the extent of his 'political' repertoire during his 1950 visit appears to have been framed by notions of American liberalism and postwar cultural diplomacy. One example is 'The House I Live In' (Sound Ex. 3.1), composed by Lewis Allan (real name Abel Meeropol and composer of 'Strange Fruit') and Earl Robinson and first recorded by White in 1944, which White appears to have played frequently. The song is an idealistic paean to American pluralism and equality:

*What is America to me? / A name, a map, or a flag I see,  
 A certain word: democracy / What is America to me?  
 The house I live in, a plot of earth, a street, / The grocer and the butcher and  
 the people that I meet,  
 The children in the playground, the faces that I see / All races, all religions –  
 that's America to me.*

Given that so much of White's repertoire had focused on highlighting American racial and social divisions, and that British audiences had previously been unable to

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Pythian notes in his article that the bulk of it was written the previous year in

hear it on record, his decision to play 'The House I Live In' rather than 'Defense Factory Blues' or 'Jim Crow Train', for instance, is somewhat surprising. Yet it is crucial to acknowledge the centrality of the song's ideals to 'Cultural Front' music-making: as Denning notes, progressive artists and performers rallied first around the populist nation-building principles of the New Deal, and then of course around the allied war effort and opposition to fascism. As I have described at the beginning of this chapter, White had already participated in these contexts through his involvement in the production of *The Man Who Went To War* in 1944.

White's association with ideals of American liberal democracy were further enforced by his friendship with the Roosevelts. President Roosevelt had become an admirer of the singer's work following the release of *Southern Exposure* in 1941 and invited White to perform at the White House on a number of occasions, in both formal and informal circumstances. Wald notes, too, that White's relationship with Roosevelt was not only that of musician and patron: the two men would also privately discuss contemporary racial issues.<sup>73</sup> After Roosevelt's death, White continued to perform regularly for First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt's charitable causes, and in 1945 composed 'The Man Who Couldn't Walk Around' in memory of the President. White also took part in Eleanor Roosevelt's 'goodwill' visits to Europe, and arranged his first British tour as an extension of one of these trips.<sup>74</sup> Along the way, White performed for formal occasions, to audiences of ambassadors, royalty, and other dignitaries. His intimate style and broad repertoire were a perfect fit: in Sweden, White performed to the royal family, who sat at his feet while he taught them the words to 'When The Saints Go Marching In' and 'On Top Of Old Smoky'.<sup>75</sup> White also performed several outdoor concerts, drawing large crowds. In

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response to White's debut British tour.

<sup>73</sup> Wald, *Society Blues*, pp. 88-89.

<sup>74</sup> Wald, *Society Blues*, pp. 150, 170-171.

<sup>75</sup> Wald, *Society Blues*, p. 171.

Gothenburg, some 15,000 people gathered to hear him perform, first via a public address relay from inside the theatre, and then live from the steps of the theatre.<sup>76</sup>

Crucially, reports of these concerts in the British musical press preceded White's arrival in Britain. They offer an intriguing frame for White's British reception, one that again positions the guitarist's authenticity in relation to his broad appeal to diverse audiences, rather than his ability to encapsulate 'authentic' African American folk culture. Writing in the *Melody Maker*, the Danish promoter Harald Grut described White as a musician

[who] has walked with kings without losing his common touch. The fact that he has reached a degree of perfection which a folk artist seldom obtains has not made him forget that he is a man of the people, and his songs are still people's songs, given life with deeply felt sincerity and conviction.<sup>77</sup>

Here, Grut acknowledges that White does not fit preconceived notions of an authentic folksinger, but instead points to White's musical approach as a form of cultural diplomacy, where both music and musician could move seamlessly between social classes, ethnic groups, and nation states. In this way, White's British performances offer a significant reconceptualisation of the meaning of American folksong traditions. While audiences recognised that these traditions were rooted in the unique cultural and social contexts of their origins, critical writing surrounding White's 1950 tour also foregrounded the mobility of these traditions and their ability to resonate with transatlantic ideals of interracial and international harmony.

### **(Re-) asserting the 'real' Mississippi blues: Big Bill Broonzy in Britain**

The ideals associated with African American folksong represented in White's European performances would soon be turned on their head by the arrival of another visiting blues musician, the singer and guitarist Big Bill Broonzy. In September 1951, Broonzy gave two concerts in London, having recently completed a tour of

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<sup>76</sup> Henry Kahn, 'Josh White, Harry Fox Embark on Vocal Tours', *Melody Maker*, 1 July 1950, p. 6.

Germany and France. In interviews with the awaiting musical press, the guitarist espoused a more restricted, 'rooted' perspective on the blues, casting it as a fundamentally rural folk tradition with origins in manual labour and economic repression, while positioning himself as its sole living embodiment. In particular, Broonzy distanced himself from his most immediate musical contemporaries, asserting that these so-called 'city singers' had drifted away from 'real' blues performance due to their contact with urban life and the professional entertainment industry:

Fellows like Bumble Bee Slim...they never been in the fields and never was real poor, so how can they know the blues? Or Lonnie Johnson...that's Chicago music, man, that's not the blues.<sup>78</sup>

Broonzy's performances incorporated a range of African American folksong styles, from ballads to spirituals as well as blues. Yet his performances lacked White's finesse: Broonzy's voice was rougher, and his phrasing relaxed to the point of waywardness. Between numbers, too, Broonzy regaled his audience with reminiscences and folktales related to his songs.<sup>79</sup> Consequently, his renditions of songs like 'Plough Hand Blues', 'Trouble in Mind', 'Nobody Knows The Trouble I've Seen', and 'Key To The Highway' took on autobiographical connotations, even though (with the exception of 'Plough Hand Blues') Broonzy was not their composer.

Broonzy's 1951 concerts prompted a flurry of writing in the British musical press attesting to his historical importance and authenticity. 'He is a plain blues singer', French critic and promoter Hugues Panassié explained in the *Melody Maker*, always sticking to the pure idiom of the early blues [...] as they were sung

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<sup>77</sup> Harald Grut, 'Josh White – A Man of the People', *Melody Maker*, 1 July 1950, p. 9.

<sup>78</sup> Ernest Borneman, 'Big Bill Talkin'', *Melody Maker*, 29 September 1951, p. 2.

<sup>79</sup> Schwartz, *How Britain Got The Blues*, p. 41.



and played before jazz music really started, and as they are still sung and played today way down in the State of Mississippi.<sup>80</sup>

Broonzy's onstage effusiveness encouraged listeners' fantasies about the blues as unmediated expression; critics embraced him as a living embodiment of 'authentic' blues. British critic Derrick Stewart-Baxter noted that Broonzy's 'store of blues lyrics...is almost inexhaustible', while Panassié and the Belgian writer Yannick Bruynoghe went so far as to interpret both his speech and manner as inherently musical. '[Broonzy's] job, for the time being, is to open his heart and soul to us over here', reflected Panassié, concluding that 'Big Bill gives, though his music, his total personality, his whole self'. Bruynoghe, likewise, observed that even Broonzy's conversation 'could be separated into couplets, slid into the twelve-bar framework, and served up as the real stuff'.<sup>81</sup> In particular, Broonzy's visit attracted an inevitable comparison with Josh White's 'smooth delivery and conscious artistry'.<sup>82</sup> Stewart-Baxter offered a convenient binary: Broonzy was an authentic 'blues singer', while White was a 'singer of blues'.<sup>83</sup>

Yet for Broonzy to present himself as one of the few remaining 'real' blues singers demanded a degree of skilful reinvention on his part. Scholars have highlighted Broonzy's adeptness in transforming not only his repertoire and style, but also the way that he positioned himself at the centre of the blues's development and character: biographer Bob Riesman sees Broonzy as 'a tremendous storyteller [...] [whose] greatest invention may have been himself' and who 'crafted a persona [...] that would bring him international acclaim and steady work for the rest of his career'.<sup>84</sup> Broonzy altered – and in some cases fabricated – elements of his life story to align personal experiences with the repertoire he sang. He regularly overstated his

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<sup>80</sup> Hugues Panassié, 'Big Bill Doesn't Sell His Music – He Gives It Away', *Melody Maker*, 15 September 1951, p. 9.

<sup>81</sup> Panassié, 'Big Bill Doesn't Sell His Music'; Yannick Bruynoghe, 'Meet Bill Broonzy', 11 August 1951, p. 9.

<sup>82</sup> For 'smooth delivery and conscious artistry', see Derrick Stewart-Baxter, 'A Date with the Blues', *Melody Maker*, 15 September 1951, p. 9.

<sup>83</sup> Stewart-Baxter, 'A Date with the Blues'.

<sup>84</sup> Bob Riesman, *I Feel So Good: The Life and Times of Big Bill Broonzy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 5, 165.

age and, although he was born in Arkansas, claimed to be from Mississippi in order to situate himself at the putative birth of the blues tradition.<sup>85</sup> More egregious was the way that Broonzy distanced himself from urban and professional music making. In fact, Broonzy had been a professional blues musician and a prolific ‘race’ recording artist in Chicago for nearly three decades by 1951. Under the direction of the record producer Lester Melrose, Broonzy was part of a stable of musicians including Washboard Sam, Jazz Gillum, Tampa Red, and Big Maceo Merriweather. Together, these musicians accompanied each other and developed a recognisable production aesthetic renowned for its formulaic structure and often-gratuitous use of sexual innuendo. This ‘city blues’ style was a leading form of African American popular entertainment in Chicago and throughout the South during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>86</sup>

When assessing the discrepancies between Broonzy’s musical career and the folkloric image he presented for British audiences, scholars have typically cast Broonzy as a skilled manipulator who found easy prey among his new audience. Biographer Bob Riesman argues that British critics ‘found the combination of [Broonzy’s] performances and his personality irresistible’, while Schwartz argues that ‘nobody [in Britain] knew how many country blues players were still alive; Broonzy encouraged the belief that he was the last.’<sup>87</sup> Both authors follow similar reasoning: audiences were persuaded of Broonzy’s authenticity through a combination of his presentational skill and their own ignorance. While it is true that British audiences were not at that point aware of the current whereabouts of the many rural folk blues singers who would be discovered in the 1960s, focusing on this relative lack of knowledge should not detract from our understanding of how

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<sup>85</sup> Riesman, *I Feel So Good*, p. 165. In his 1955 autobiography, Broonzy states emphatically that he was born in 1893. However, this date has been disputed, with other sources giving dates of 1898 and 1903. After extensive research, Bob Riesman and Bob Eagle date Broonzy’s birth to June 26, 1903, which is now considered authoritative. See Big Bill Broonzy with Yannick Bruynoghe, *Big Bill Blues: William Broonzy’s story as told to Yannick Bruynoghe* (London: Cassell, 1955), p.7; Riesman, *I Feel So Good*, p. 6-7.

<sup>86</sup> See Mike Rowe, *Chicago Blues: The City and the Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1981), pp. 17-25.

Broonzy's reception engaged with what blues and folksong enthusiasts *did* know at the time. Moreover, both Schwartz and Gelly see Broonzy's personification of blues authenticity as having come at the expense of his immediate predecessor, Josh White. Roberta Schwartz argues that British notions of authenticity were 'updated and refined by each new experience with the blues and its performers': her linear trajectory assumes that Broonzy's arrival overrode prior notions of 'authentic' blues established by earlier record-based engagement, or by earlier visitors such as White.<sup>88</sup>

While these observations are valuable, I believe that they do not account for several key elements of Broonzy's career and reception. To begin with, it is clear that some British enthusiasts were not entirely ignorant of the elements of Broonzy's career that he is held to have downplayed. Broonzy's name appears several times in the musical press before his visit in 1951, and in each instance it is in relation to his activities as a recording artist and as a professional entertainer in Chicago.<sup>89</sup> When the critic and record producer Denis Preston recalled a recent trip to Chicago in an article for the *Musical Express* in 1948, for instance, he wrote of his discovery of a 'blues lovers' paradise' on Chicago's West Side, where Big Bill Broonzy, Tampa Red, Roosevelt Sykes and Little Brother Montgomery were

all working in the vicinity, [and] giving forth in the best barrelhouse manner [...] Big Bill [Broonzy] [...] works thrice weekly at the Gatewood Tavern on Lake Street [with a] four piece band – piano, traps [drums], alto and himself on guitar.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Riesman, *I Feel So Good*, p. 165; Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, p. 41.

<sup>88</sup> Schwartz, *How Britain Got The Blues*, p. 40.

<sup>89</sup> Derrick Stewart-Baxter's first article on Broonzy, despite positioning him as a 'folksinger', discusses a series of the guitarist's Chicago recordings for Okeh and Melotone. See Stewart-Baxter, 'A Date with the Blues'.

<sup>90</sup> Denis Preston, 'Stateside Commentary', *Musical Express*, 20 August 1948, pp. 2, 4. The *Melody Maker* had also reported briefly on Broonzy's 1945 concerts at the Village Vanguard in New York City. See 'Jive Jottings', *Melody Maker*, 24 November 1945, p. 5. In December 1946, too, Jones and Harris briefly discussed a network of Chicago-based working blues musicians featuring Broonzy in their 'Off the Race Lists' article on Barbecue Bob. Here, Jones drew on an interview with Broonzy published in the American magazine *Jazz Record* in March 1946. See Jones

During his British visits, too, Broonzy did not entirely hide his earlier career as an urban blues musician: a recording session for the London-based Melodisc label in September 1951 saw the singer record four sides under the pseudonym 'Chicago Bill', a surprising moniker for someone who cast himself so vociferously as a 'Mississippi blues singer'. Broonzy also displayed a remarkable knowledge of popular song repertoire: his 1951 concerts, as well as those on subsequent visits, would often feature popular 'tin pan alley' songs like 'When Did You Leave Heaven?' and 'I'm Looking Over a Four Leaf Clover'.<sup>91</sup>

Most crucially, Broonzy had also been involved in Cultural Front music making. Riesman has detailed how the guitarist had begun to refashion his approach to live performance some years earlier, when his music attracted the attention of American folksong enthusiasts and political activists.<sup>92</sup> Most significant of these was the group People's Songs, a promotional organisation headed by Pete Seeger which arranged musical events for progressive causes, in particular labour activism and civil rights. People's Songs aimed to 'create, promote, and distribute songs of labor and the American people' through the dissemination of progressive song on record, in print, and at their 'hootenannies': these were informal gatherings that conspicuously integrated both black and white American folksong traditions. In addition to showcasing progressive folksong enthusiasts-turned-performers like Pete and Peggy Seeger, People's Songs drew on a circle of professional African American musicians who were known in the circles of the Cultural Front, including Lead Belly, the folksong duo Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, and Josh White.<sup>93</sup> Throughout 1946 and 1947, Broonzy appeared at a number of these 'hootenannies', as well as at a series of concerts at New York's Town Hall organised by Alan

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and Harris, 'Collectors' Corner' [Barbecue Bob – Part 2]; Big Bill Broonzy, 'Baby, I Done Got Wise', *Jazz Record*, 42 (March 1946), 9-12.

<sup>91</sup> British blues critic and researcher Paul Oliver would later note Broonzy's remarkably wide repertoire. See Paul Oliver, 'Just A Dream', liner notes to Big Bill Broonzy and Sonny Boy Williamson, *Big Bill and Sonny Boy* (RCA Victor RD-7685, 1964), in *Blues Off The Record: Thirty Years of Blues Commentary* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1988), pp. 111-115.

<sup>92</sup> Riesman, *I Feel So Good*, p. 127.

Lomax, who had also been a founding member of People's Songs. Titled 'The Midnight Special', Lomax's late-night concerts brought together a range of African American musicians to illustrate the development of black music and its contribution to American folksong. The first concert, entitled 'Blues at Midnight', was held on 9 November 1946, and featured Broonzy alongside jazz saxophonist Sidney Bechet, the boogie-woogie pianist Pete Johnson, and harmonica player Sonny Terry. Lomax played the role of narrator, explaining the development of blues and jazz and interviewing the musicians.

Broonzy's British performances would emulate key elements of these earlier Cultural Front activities. As it happens, Alan Lomax was in Britain during the Autumn of 1951, collecting folksongs in Scotland for the forthcoming *Columbia World Library* series of albums. Hearing at the last moment that Broonzy would be giving a concert in London, Lomax drove back to London within a day to compère at Broonzy's second evening performance. On stage, Lomax engaged Broonzy in conversation regarding the origins of his songs and their relevance to his life, much as he had done during the 'hootenany' concerts at New York's Town Hall. As Ernest Borneman commented in the *Melody Maker*, 'the audience felt as if they had wandered more or less by accident into one of those fabulous jazz parties of which the books are full.'<sup>94</sup>

Perhaps most intriguing is the extent to which the influence of the 'cabaret blues' aesthetic can also be heard in Broonzy's performances. This is most notable in Broonzy's composition 'Black, Brown, and White' (Sound Ex. 3.2). Written during the singer's associations with People's Songs, the sheet music of 'Black, Brown, and White' was published in People's Songs' newsletter to disseminate it among amateur

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<sup>93</sup> Sing Out! The People's Songs Archive, <<https://singout.org/ps-archive/>> [accessed 16 December 2017]; Riesman, *I Feel So Good*, pp. 124-125.

<sup>94</sup> Riesman, *I Feel So Good*, pp. 164-5. Lomax's 'Midnight Special' concerts bore many similarities to an earlier concert of African American musicians for progressive white audiences, the 'From Spirituals To Swing' concert organised by jazz promoter John Hammond at Carnegie Hall in 1938, in which these musicians had also taken part. Lomax had attended Hammond's concert, and appears to have deliberately chosen several of the musicians who performed there for his own concerts. Borneman, 'Big Bill Talkin'.

performers and enthusiasts.<sup>95</sup> The song describes situations in which the protagonist experiences racial discrimination: being refused service or employment, inequality in wages and housing. Each verse ends with the refrain:

*If you're white, you's all right*  
*If you're brown, stick around,*  
*But if you're black, mmm brother*  
*Get back get back get back get back.*

As with many of his songs, Broonzy asserted that 'Black, Brown, and White' drew on his own experiences. Introducing it at a concert in Edinburgh in 1952, Broonzy stated:

This is a song I wrote back in 1945 [...] the reason that I wrote this number is because, I came to Chicago [...] and I had to get a job in a foundry [...] I was doing the same work that another fella was doing, and he got the high fee and I got the low fee.<sup>96</sup>

This account chimes with one of the song's verses, in which another man is paid 'a dollar an hour, while I got fifty cents'. Furthermore, the way that 'Black, Brown, and White' deals with specific contexts for discrimination in turn mirrors the technique used by Josh White in his compositions for the album *Southern Exposure*. Fittingly, too, the final two verses of Broonzy's song draw on tropes of manual labour and war work as a metaphor for progressive nation (re)building. Broonzy sings:

*I helped build the country and I fought for it too*  
*Now I want you to see now brother,*  
*What a black man have to do.*  
  
[...]  
*I helped win sweet victory with my little plough and hoe*

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<sup>95</sup> In *Big Bill Blues*, Broonzy claimed to have written the song in 1945 and attempted unsuccessfully to get it recorded by a number of labels. He would eventually record the song in Paris in 1951. See Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, pp. 127, 132. The sheet music for 'Black, Brown, and White' was published in the *People's Songs Bulletin*, November 1946, p. 9.

<sup>96</sup> Speech transcribed from Big Bill Broonzy, 'Black, Brown, and White', *On Tour in Britain, 1952* (JASMCD 3011-2, 2002).

*Now I want you to tell me brother*

*What you gonna do about the old Jim Crow?*

Broonzy's guitar accompaniment also draws on conventions of progressive song performance. While other up-tempo numbers in Broonzy's repertoire such as 'House Rent Stomp' or 'Keep Your Hands Off Her' display his adeptness at finger picking, 'Black, Brown, and White' boasts a strummed guitar part, which supports a vocal line that remains succinct and in tempo throughout. This consistent tempo, strummed guitar part, and 'catchy', sardonic chorus make the song amenable to group participation, as was common at People's Songs 'hootenannies' and other informal gatherings, rather than formal presentation.<sup>97</sup> Despite listeners interpreting Broonzy's performances as the epitome of authentic folk blues, his performance style drew on a history of deliberate 'stagings' of African American music: first the 'cabaret blues' style associated with Josh White as early as 1940, and later the informal eclecticism of People's Songs 'hootenannies' and Lomax's 'Midnight Special' concerts.

Overall, then, Broonzy and White were more similar than many listeners necessarily realised. Both performers had cut their teeth as itinerant musicians in the rural South, before becoming successful entertainers and 'race' recording artists during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Their earliest musical activities immersed them in African American folk traditions, while their subsequent commercial and professional success required technique, versatility, and an ear for what would sell. It was arguably these same skills that allowed them both to re-orient their careers towards the expectations of white British and American audiences during the 1940s. It is therefore interesting that White and Broonzy were commonly positioned as diametrically opposed in British writings, and that even their acknowledged similarities were interpreted in different ways. Even though White was acknowledged to have had direct experiences of African American life and folk culture, his slick performance style and broader repertoire of traditional music was

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<sup>97</sup> Here I draw on Thomas Turino's distinction between 'participatory' and 'presentational' performance. See Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 23-65.

not judged to be an authentic representation of these earlier experiences; rather, he was a 'singer of folksongs' whose performances offered only a staged presentation of folksong. Broonzy, on the other hand, was a 'folksinger': he was perceived as a direct participant in African American folk traditions, his equally well-honed repertoire and performance style shaped entirely by his experiences of African American life in the Deep South.

The contradictory nature of Broonzy and White's British reception is to a certain extent unsurprising. As I have shown throughout this chapter, folk blues was associated with both 'rootedness' and mobility; that Broonzy and White should each appear to personify these contrasting ideas – yet also blur them – is in some ways entirely expected. 'Theatrical' and 'anti-theatrical' folksong performance were two sides of the same coin, as McGinley has observed.<sup>98</sup> Even though white audiences on both sides of the Atlantic believed in the existence of an idealised, authentic folk blues, they nevertheless consumed it live through highly mediated scenarios. Broonzy's British audiences clearly thought they were hearing a living exponent of the 'real Mississippi blues', but the manner in which they did so bore all the trappings of a professional recital: a concert hall stage, an audience, and a compère who explained the music's historical and cultural significance.

Yet the question still remains as to why Broonzy's firmly 'rooted' perspective became the paradigmatic view of blues authenticity. Most obviously, Broonzy's effusive commentaries on the origin and meaning of the blues inevitably turned to self-promotion. In the same way that Broonzy distinguished himself from other Chicago blues musicians that British listeners might have encountered on record like Bumble Bee Slim and Lonnie Johnson, labelling them 'city singers' in contrast to his own 'rural' style and background, Broonzy would make the same critique of White. Trumpeter Humphrey Lyttelton recalls how Broonzy admonished White in person at a concert in 1952, when the guitarist discovered that White was in the audience. Broonzy declared of White 'He cain't [sic] sing the blues! He's from

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<sup>98</sup> McGinley, *Staging the Blues*, p. 84.



the North – ain't never heard no one from the North sing the blues!' This statement conveniently overlooks both White's South Carolina heritage and Broonzy's own considerable activity as a professional blues musician in Chicago.<sup>99</sup>

We can also interpret Broonzy's presentation of himself and his music as a strategic attempt to capitalise on the essentialism that lay at the heart of many British enthusiasts' understanding of the blues. If documenting the unique nature of 'the Negro world' and how it was expressed in the blues was a prime motivation for early British blues collectors and critics, as O'Connell has suggested, then it is understandable that British audiences embraced Broonzy's personification of this relationship.<sup>100</sup> Despite British enthusiasts' stated commitment to exploring the relationship between the blues and African American experiences, historic, deeply ingrained assumptions around African Americans' racial difference meant that British writings could all too easily fall back on problematic readings of the blues as the singular voice of a monolithic 'Negro' condition. Broonzy's willingness to meet these expectations helped to establish a consensus around the tenets of blues authenticity that have since crowded out alternative readings of the relationship between cultural experience and musical expression, in particular those involving notions of professionalism, theatricalism, commercial success, or stylistic versatility.

At the same time, Broonzy's ascendance as the epitome of the 'folk blues' can also be understood in terms of changing attitudes to the music's perceived international and interracial mobility, not just increasing belief in its 'rootedness'. Although interpretations of African American folksong's mobility were grounded first in ideals of leftwing solidarity, and in service of wartime Allied unity, postwar white interest in the blues increasingly 'embraced the music of the margins with an

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<sup>99</sup> Humphrey Lyttelton, *The Best of Jazz: Basin Street to Harlem* (London: Robson Books, 1978), p. 64. It is possible that Broonzy's reference to 'the North' refers specifically to White's residence in New York City. It is also important to note that while both New York City and Chicago were both 'North' in relation to 'the South', Chicago had a far greater link with the Deep South of Mississippi, Arkansas, and Alabama, from which the majority of the city's black, blues-playing migrants came. Nevertheless, Broonzy's critiques of other musicians at this time frequently conflate 'the North' and 'the city', implying that they were to his mind synonymous. Broonzy's admonition of White is therefore quite hypocritical.

ear toward liberal pluralism and countercultural disaffection, but not radical politics’, as Garabedian has observed. Crucially, while these associations could be productive and optimistic, they were also confining. The idea that the blues could contain overt political critique, Garabedian continues, was over time compromised by ‘anticommunist repression, Cold War cultural backlash, and rising American conservatism’.<sup>101</sup> Although anticommunist sentiment did not reach the same heights in Britain as it did in the United States, the early postwar period was characterised by a growing public scepticism of the Left. A General Election in 1950 reduced the Labour party’s majority to only five seats, and a subsequent election in 1951 saw the Conservatives take power on a manifesto decrying Atlee’s ‘Socialist Government’ and calling for ‘a new Government not...cramped by doctrinal prejudices or inflamed by the passions of class warfare.’<sup>102</sup> Jazz and blues interest still attracted those with leftwing political tendencies but, as George McKay has observed, these genres’ associations with radicalism and protest continually buffeted against nostalgic anti-modernism and an idealising of tradition over innovation and reform.<sup>103</sup>

These broad shifts had a clear impact on the reception of folk blues on both sides of the Atlantic. In Josh White’s case, the overt political content of his music had exposed him to growing scrutiny in the United States. White cut his ties with Café Society in 1947 in order to distance himself from its founders, Leon and Barney Josephson, who had appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). During his first British tour in the summer of 1950, White’s name was included in a list of suspected communist sympathisers published in *Red Channels*, a pamphlet dedicated to halting the perceived manipulation of the entertainment industry by alleged Communist sympathisers published by the

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<sup>100</sup> O’Connell, *Blues, How Do You Do?*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>101</sup> Garabedian, ‘Reds, Whites, and the Blues’, p. 202. See also Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 355.

<sup>102</sup> ‘Conservative Election Manifesto, 1951’, *British Party Election Manifestos since 1945*, <<http://politicsresources.net/area/uk/man/con51.htm>> [accessed 16 December 2017].

conservative journal *Counterattack*. In an attempt to protect his career, White testified voluntarily before HUAC immediately following his return to the United States, and submitted himself to an interview with the FBI. During these sessions, White insisted that he was unaware of the political motivations surrounding the performances he had taken part in earlier in the 1940s, such as his work with the Almanac Singers, and denied anything more than a professional relationship with politically compromised promoters and organisers. But perhaps most importantly, in his HUAC and FBI testimony White rejected the idea that music could be a vehicle for a musician's political views, declaring that 'artists are not smart about politics'. Instead, he drew on his image as an international folksong-singing ambassador, insisting that the occasional critique of American racial inequality that might be heard in his songs was borne of a deep-felt patriotism, not Communist tendencies.<sup>104</sup> White's comments contribute to a vision of America as a pluralist nation of 'different' cultures, rather than support a more critical – now potentially seditious – view that these differences were indicators of systemic inequalities and oppression that could be remedied by embracing socialism. British audiences' embrace of White's diplomatic image during his tours, then, can also be seen as a product of a transformation in how African American folksong was interpreted internationally. Rather than evoking experiences of racial and social oppression that had their corollaries in broader anticapitalist and antifascist struggles, African American ballads, blues, and spirituals could also be heard in a more sanitised form, as merely indicative of the richness of America's diverse and pluralist cultural heritage. Even the characteristic mobility associated with White's presentations of African

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<sup>103</sup> George McKay, *Circular Breathing: The Cultural Politics of Jazz in Britain* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 68.

<sup>104</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 338, 348-349. The degree to which White and other Cultural Front musicians had been ideologically committed to Communism and other left-wing causes that their performances benefited is a topic that has attracted much scholarly debate. Denning has noted how many African American musicians, in particular, were less concerned with broader ideological battles than they were with seeking out allies opposed to specific issues of segregation in the entertainment industry. Nevertheless, Denning observes that many musicians had 'recognized the social crises of the [Great] Depression and Fascism, and were

American folksong was becoming less and less associated with the political radicalism that had been so crucial in its making.

White struggled to navigate changing attitudes to the political valency of African American folksong throughout the 1940s and into the 1950s. Indeed, scepticism as to his performance style and choice of repertoire aside, charges of ‘selling out’ can just as likely be traced to his decision to distance himself publicly from his leftwing contemporaries during his HUAC testimony. Broonzy, in contrast, avoided similar conflicts: by readily conforming to white listeners’ idealised image of the ‘authentic bluesman’, Broonzy insulated himself not only from the accusations of ‘self-consciousness’ that had been levelled at White, but also from the suspicions of American conservative pressure groups. Despite his associations with People’s Songs in the mid-1940s, he never attracted scrutiny from HUAC or other rightwing campaigns; neither did the FBI place him under surveillance.<sup>105</sup> As I have shown above, too, when performing in Britain Broonzy’s performances drew on presentational techniques that had been pioneered by White, yet – with the exception of ‘Black, Brown, and White’ – his repertoire largely eschewed overtly political critique. By adopting what Riesman has described as ‘a cautious approach to politics’, and only discussing politics in rare, private moments, Broonzy was able to capitalise on an emerging understanding of African American folksong that prioritised its directness and international appeal, but was largely dismissive of its politically radical roots.<sup>106</sup>

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined how attitudes to ‘folk blues’ in the early post-war period engaged in a common binary of ‘rootedness’ and ‘mobility’. While blues and African American folksong were understood as the unique expression of African

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attracted to the hopes and energies of the Popular Front’. See Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 333.

<sup>105</sup> FBI Records Management Division, ‘[Response to Freedom of Information Act request, subject Bradley, Lee Conley (aka Big Bill Broonzy)]’, personal correspondence, 22 March 2016.

Americans' experiences and responses to oppression, at the same time these traditions were frequently reframed or re-staged to communicate to non-African-American audiences, and to cultivate interracial and international affinities. What is more, understandings of these musics' cultural value was increasingly invested in their capacity to symbolise both elements of the binary noted above.

British understandings of blues and folksong rested on the transatlantic circulation of texts, ideas, and sounds. Jazz writers and critics were increasingly influenced by American folklore scholarship and folksong collecting in addition to American jazz criticism, and likewise became increasingly attuned to political and sociological writing on black America. These influences helped inculcate 'folkloric' notions of authenticity in the reception of the blues on record. Crucially, the appeal of being able to hear an authentic 'living link' to the African American folk past on record led British listeners to interpret commercial 'race' records by professional, versatile entertainers as examples of African American folksong. Consequently, British enthusiasts came to idealise African American blues performance according to an increasingly narrow, essentialist perspective as to what constituted 'authentic' blues and folksong performance.

What British audiences largely missed, however, was the growth of interest in African American music amongst 'Cultural Front' performers, promoters, critics, and audiences in the United States, particularly in New York and Chicago. In this context, blues and folksong became vehicles for overt political critique and progressive nation building. Crucially, the involvement of blues, jazz, and folksong performance in this movement developed a unique 'cabaret blues aesthetic' that drew on ideals of folkloric authenticity and intimacy, weaponising them for the ideals of the Cultural Front and its participants. This is most evident in the work of singer and guitarist Josh White although, as I have shown, his contemporary Big Bill Broonzy was also involved in Cultural Front music making and was likewise influenced by the movement's performative and musical conventions.

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<sup>106</sup> Riesman, *I Feel So Good*, p. 192.

The enduring appeal of the ‘rooted’-‘mobile’ dualism in understandings of blues and African American folksong is vital for interpreting the reception of White and Broonzy, two of the first African American blues musicians to tour the United Kingdom. While existing scholarship on these musicians’ British reception argues that they were either viewed as antithetical to each other, or that the mantle of blues authenticity passed cleanly from White to Broonzy with the latter’s arrival, I have shown that the picture was more complex. On tour, White was to a degree able to overcome British scepticism around the ‘staged’ and ‘self-conscious’ nature of his performance style by aligning it with new notions of post-war liberalism and cultural diplomacy that grew out of his Cultural Front music making. Broonzy, meanwhile, built on the performance conventions pioneered by White while simultaneously reinscribing them as the essence of the ‘authentic’ blues.

Ultimately, both tours demonstrate the contradictions at the heart of British attitudes to blues at midcentury. Both Broonzy and White personified elements of the blues’s ‘rootedness’ in African American culture as well as its capacity for mobility. Yet British enthusiasts’ overwhelming fascination with black American culture meant that it was all too easy for audiences to overlook the historic political resonances of blues and folksong in favour of a more comfortable, depoliticised image of vernacular music making. Even while African American music attained greater international audibility, these two musicians’ efforts to navigate audiences’ changing perceptions of their music exposes the difficulties that African American performers faced when engaging with international and interracial audiences.

#### IV. 'What's On In America?': Contact and Collaboration between London and Chicago, 1958-1959

*He sang with his whole body – gyrating, twisting, shouting – preaching the blues chorus upon hypnotic chorus, weaving a pattern of quivering tension around and over an enthralled audience [...] He hunched his shoulders, leaned 'way back [...] hurling the blues into the becalmed smoke from a hundred fascinated cigarettes [...] 'I'm a **Man!** I'm a **Hoochie Coochie Man!**' [...] This was the blues, old man. Blues up-tomorrow and in the city, a long, long ways from home; blues in the city but yet of the country, of the strange southern country of hope and cotton, poverty and rich brown earth.*

— Tony Standish on hearing Muddy Waters at the Barrelhouse and Blues Club, London, October 1958. See Tony Standish, 'Muddy Waters in London (Part 1)', *Jazz Journal*, 12.1 (January 1959), 2-4, p. 3. Emphasis in original.

For blues critic Tony Standish, Chicago blues singer Muddy Waters's appearance at the Barrelhouse and Blues Club was a satisfying end to a not entirely straightforward tour. Waters's debut a fortnight earlier at the Leeds Centenary Music Festival had been marred by technical difficulties. Throughout his eight-date nationwide tour, too, critics had worried whether the singer's strident voice and electric guitar were not too 'commercial' or too 'modern' to be 'real blues'. But in the upstairs room of the Round House Pub in London's Soho, Waters's found a receptive audience: 'This was the nearest we'll get', critic Max Jones observed a week later, 'to a Chicago South Side blues performance in London.'<sup>1</sup>

In fact, contact with African American blues musicians would become more common during the late 1950s. From 1956, restrictions on foreign musicians' tours (in place since the mid-1930s) gave way to an exchange system that allowed American bands and orchestras to visit Britain as long as an American tour could be

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<sup>1</sup> Max Jones, 'This World of Jazz', *Melody Maker*, 25 October 1958, p. 11. For Waters's 1958 tour itinerary, see Fig. 4.1.

organised for a British band.<sup>2</sup> Increased first-hand exposure to African American performers inspired both musicians and listeners: musicians turned towards styles demonstrated by their foreign guests, while critics and collectors dug further into the relationship between the blues and black experience. Increased contact with African American performers also raised debates over what constituted ‘authentic’ blues, how visiting musicians should be (re)presented in print and in performance, and the role of British performers and critics in promoting and preserving the blues tradition.

In this chapter, I examine the politics of encounter between British blues enthusiasts and their African American musical idols towards the close of the 1950s. I model my enquiry on the developing contemporary exchange relationship by focusing on Muddy Waters’s visit to Britain in 1958 followed by two subsequent visits of Chris Barber’s Jazz Band to the United States the following year. I begin by assessing Waters’s critical reception during his 1958 tour and contextualising it within British understandings of the blues’s relationship to African American society. I then consider how assessments of Waters’s performances drew not only on ideas of ‘authentic’ musical style but also on developing ideas about collaboration between host and visitor within the ‘exchange economy’. Turning to the Barber band’s visits to the United States, I examine how the travelogues and reminiscences of Barber, Otilie Patterson, and other band members engaged with revivalist ideas regarding the state of African American culture and the politics of musical mobility. Finally, I trace how Barber and Patterson were able to use these visits to rekindle

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<sup>2</sup> Jim Godbolt, *A History of Jazz in Britain, 1950-70* (London: Quartet Books, 1989), p. 166 cites 1934 date, however Parsonage cites 1935. See Catherine Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain, 1880-1935* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 258. The visiting musicians I discuss in this chapter were largely exempt from these restrictions. Nevertheless, the general relaxing of touring rules made it easier for visitors as a whole and, as I will explain, changed the nature of visiting.



their acquaintance with Muddy Waters, and consider the value that British and African American participants placed on these encounters.

Date	Activity
14 October	Arrive London, interview with Tony Standish <sup>3</sup>
15 October	Performance on <i>People and Places</i> , Granada TV, Manchester
16 October	Two performances with the Jazz Today Unit, Leeds Centenary Musical Festival, Odeon Theatre, Leeds
17 October	Two performances with the Jazz Today Unit, Leeds Centenary Musical Festival, Odeon Theatre, Leeds
<b>National Tour</b>	Accompanied by Chris Barber's Jazz Band, featuring Otilie Patterson
18 October	City Hall, Newcastle
19 October	Gaumont Theatre, Doncaster
20 October	St. Pancras Town Hall, London
22 October	Winter Gardens Theatre, Bournemouth
23 October	Town Hall, Birmingham
24 October	Colston Hall, Bristol
25 October	Free Trade Hall, Manchester
26 October	Free Trade Hall, Manchester
27 October	St. Andrews Hall, Glasgow
28 October	Performance on <i>Late Extra</i> , AR-TV, London
<b>Post-Tour Club Appearances</b>	
30 October	Barrelhouse and Blues Club, London
2 November	Mardi Gras Club, Liverpool
3 November	Depart London

Fig 4.1: Muddy Waters and Otis Spann UK tour itinerary, October-November, 1958.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Standish interviewed Waters and Spann in London on a second occasion, too, some time after their performance at St. Pancras Town Hall. This interview may have taken place on 21 October, or between 29 October and 2 November. See Tony Standish, 'Muddy Waters in London (Part 2)', *Jazz Journal*, 12.2 (February 1959), 3-6.

<sup>4</sup> '[Photo Inset]', *Melody Maker*, 18 October 1958, p. 13; Jones, 'This World of Jazz', *Melody Maker*, 25 October 1958, p. 11; Max Jones, 'This World of Jazz', *Melody Maker*, 8 November 1958, p. 11; Standish, 'Muddy Waters in London (Part 1)'.

## **Muddy Waters's 1958 British Tour and the Acceptance of Urban Blues**

On the afternoon of October 16, 1958, Muddy Waters and his regular pianist Otis Spann took the stage at the Odeon Theatre, Leeds. Sporting an electric Fender Telecaster, gleaming white to match Spann's tuxedo, Waters played a set of his recent chart successes, including 'Hoochie Coochie Man', 'Mannish Boy', 'Nineteen Years Old', 'Close To You', 'Got My Mojo Workin' ', 'I'm Ready', and 'Just Make Love To Me'.<sup>5</sup> Waters was the epitome of urban blues (or 'Chicago blues' as it has since become known), a style that captured African Americans' mass migration from the agrarian south to the industrial north.<sup>6</sup> Born McKinley Morganfield in rural Mississippi in 1913, Waters had spent the first thirty years of his life as a Delta sharecropper, playing guitar in his spare time and for local parties. Moving north in 1943, first to Memphis and then to Chicago, he began to play guitar professionally on Chicago's South Side, pioneering a unique style of 'urban' yet equally 'down-home' blues characterised by his commanding vocals, strident use of the bottleneck-slide on the electric guitar, and the amplified harmonica of Little Walter. By the mid-1950s, Waters's band – now including Spann, a fellow Mississippian, on piano – was one of the most successful blues groups in Chicago. They scored a string of hits on the rhythm and blues charts, and toured extensively around the African American theatres and nightspots of the Midwest and the South.

This dramatic transformation in both Waters's life and his music was absent from publicity for Waters's UK tour, which cast him as 'the finest living Mississippi

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<sup>5</sup> Waters also performed several of his earliest hits, 'I Can't Be Satisfied', 'Rollin' Stone', and 'Long Distance Call', which he had recorded in Chicago between 1948 and 1951.

<sup>6</sup> Mike Rowe, *Chicago Blues: The City and the Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1981), pp. 26-39.

blues singer’.<sup>7</sup> The programme for his Leeds debut highlighted his rural upbringing, declaring his music a ‘living link to the folk tradition of the Deep South’, produced without thought of commercial success. Although the author noted Waters’s move to Chicago, s/he played down the guitarist’s professional recording activities and did not discuss his distinctive ‘urban blues’ style. Indeed, the author linked Waters stylistically to Big Bill Broonzy, drawing on one of the musician’s UK interviews:

The late Big Bill Bronzy [sic], talking about the passing of the Southern country blues singer, once said, ‘There’s none of them left now – except, maybe, Muddy Waters [...] See the way he plays guitar? Mississippi style, not the city way’.

Waters’s performance style, then, was initially presented as similar to Broonzy’s carefully crafted ‘folk’ blues, set apart from anything urban or modern.<sup>8</sup> As discussed in chapter 3, Broonzy had relentlessly asserted the centrality of rural folkways to authentic blues performance, rejecting as anathema any hint of urbane sophistication or professionalisation.

The discrepancy between the advance press coverage of Waters’s tour and the more abrasive, up-to-date sound that characterised his British performances clearly rankled some critics. ‘Why should it be necessary to kow-tow to the electronics age to put over this essentially simple form of the jazz art?’ asked the *Yorkshire Post*’s critic Ronald Boyle, decrying the Chicago bluesman’s ‘expensive and modern’ electric guitar.<sup>9</sup> Reactions of this nature would dog Waters throughout his visit. Jazz critic Max Jones wrote favourably of Waters’s performance at St.

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Muddy Waters on Leeds Bill’, *Melody Maker*, 16 August 1958, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> ‘The “Jazz Today” Unit with Muddy Waters’, Concert Programme, Leeds Centenary Musical Festival, Odeon Theatre, Leeds, 16-17 October 1958, n.p..

<sup>9</sup> Ronald Boyle, ‘Muddy Waters and His Blues’, *Yorkshire Post*, 17 October 1958, p. 5.

Pancras Town Hall in London, but he conceded that ‘there were times when my thoughts turned with affection to the [...] acoustic guitar heard on his first record’.<sup>10</sup>

Waters himself was aware of these misgivings, reflecting in an interview with Jones towards the end of his tour that he would try to address the British taste for ‘soft guitar and the old blues’ on his next visit by ‘learn[ing] some old songs first’.<sup>11</sup>

Another potential factor in critics’ aversion to Waters’s performance style was its perceived similarity to a recent import from the United States: rhythm and blues.<sup>12</sup> As Roberta Schwartz has explored, rhythm and blues records by artists like Wynonie Harris, Earl Bostic, and Fats Domino began to be released in Britain from 1954.<sup>13</sup> Although the style garnered mainstream popularity, blues and jazz enthusiasts were critical of the style’s ‘coarse’ guitar and saxophone timbres, and feared that the music’s popularity amongst African American consumers signalled a decline in taste among this community. As in the case of revivalist aversion to swing music a decade earlier, critics of rhythm and blues saw the genre’s popularity as evidence of the erosion of African American culture by commercial and technological forces. ‘The era of the great blues singers is over’, wrote *Jazz Monthly* editor Albert McCarthy in 1955:

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<sup>10</sup> Max Jones, ‘This World of Jazz’, *Melody Maker*, 25 October 1958, p. 11. Jones was one of a select number of British collectors to have heard a copy of Waters’s Library of Congress recordings, made by Alan Lomax in 1941 (see Chapter 3).

<sup>11</sup> Jones, ‘This World of Jazz’, *Melody Maker*, 8 November 1958, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> Jack Florin, writing in the *Manchester Evening News* later in Waters’s tour, stated that while he deemed Waters’s singing as ‘authentic’, he ‘[could] not class him as a true blues artist...most of his songs...owe too much to the rhythm and blues style’. See Jack Florin, ‘Muddy Water Blues’, *Manchester Evening News*, 27 October 1958, p. 2; quoted in Sandra B. Tooze, *Muddy Waters: The Mojo Man* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1997), p. 165.

<sup>13</sup> Roberta Freund Schwartz, *How Britain Got The Blues: The Transmission and Reception of American Blues Style in the United Kingdom* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 50-53.

In a matter of a decade or so the body of Afro-American folk song will become a museum piece. In some of the remote parts of the Southern States this music still has a life of its own, but the spread of the radio and television [...] will soon swamp this fine music.<sup>14</sup>

Waters's assertive vocal style, amplified guitar, and penchant for dancing onstage during Spann's piano solos confirmed some audiences' fears that black popular music had little connection to its 'folk' past.

Scholarship has made much of the negative reactions to Waters's modern style. Perhaps the most famous account is found in historian and record producer Samuel Charters's 1959 book *The Country Blues*. Charters, who was not present for Waters's tour, describes how one critic was 'so stunned by the volume of Muddy's amplified guitar that he found himself retreating, a row at a time, toward the back of the hall', finally taking refuge in the men's toilets. Both Robert Gordon and Benjamin Filene have quoted a contemporary newspaper headline of 'Screaming Guitar and Howling Piano'. These accounts are likely to be apocryphal.<sup>15</sup> Even so,

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<sup>14</sup> Albert McCarthy, 'Rhythm and Blues', in *Jazzbook 1955* ed. by Albert McCarthy and Sinclair Traill (London: Cassell, 1955), pp. 84-93 (pp. 84-85).

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Charters, *The Country Blues*, revd. edn (New York: Da Capo Press, 1975), pp. 245-246. Several authors draw on this anecdote, each with slight modification, yet efforts to identify the critic in question or locate the review in print have failed. See Schwartz, *How Britain Got The Blues*, p. 79. Charters's version is written in the third person and cites no sources, whereas Gordon's version is written in the first person and cites liner notes by Les Fancourt, which cite no sources. Importantly, Charters himself has noted that he had deliberately exaggerated some elements of his narrative in *The Country Blues* in order to make his text polemical. See Robert Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied: The Life and Times of Muddy Waters* (London: Pimlico, 2003), p. 161; Les Fancourt, liner notes to *The Complete Muddy Waters, 1947-1967* (Charly CD Red Box 3, 1992); Charters, *The Country Blues*, pp. xi-xii. Filene quotes the appearance of the headline 'Screaming Guitar and Howling Piano', as does Robert Gordon, both cite a 1969 interview with Muddy Waters conducted by music historian James Rooney, but the existence of this headline remains unverified. See Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied*, p. 161; Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,

they encapsulate how scholars have viewed British audiences as ‘conditioned to understand the blues as old, rural, and acoustic’, in the words of folksong scholar Benjamin Filene.<sup>16</sup> This perspective needs to be treated with some caution, as British enthusiasts’ ignorance of new trends, or unwillingness to engage with them, is surely overstated. In the case of Waters, no fewer than fourteen of the singer’s Chicago recordings had been released in Britain by the time of his 1958 visit, and they had been positively received by prominent critics including Max Jones in the *Melody Maker*, Humphrey Lyttelton in the *New Musical Express*, and Paul Oliver in *Music Mirror*. None of these reviewers had expressed an aversion to Waters’s use of amplification on disc; in fact, they had declared it a bold stylistic innovation.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, historians who have argued that Waters was received poorly in 1958 have overlooked the extent to which Waters’s music was understood more commonly as a development of the ‘folk’ blues traditions encapsulated by Big Bill Broonzy. Writing about Waters’s first British releases in 1955, Paul Oliver observed undeniable continuities with prewar blues artists who were already familiar, such as Blind Lemon Jefferson and Kokomo Arnold.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Waters’s first professional successes – his recordings of ‘I Can’t Be Satisfied’, ‘I Feel Like Going Home’, and ‘Rollin’ Stone’ made in Chicago for Aristocrat (later Chess) Records between 1948

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2000), p. 118; James Rooney, *Bossmen: Bill Monroe and Muddy Waters* (New York: Da Capo, 1986), p. 137.

<sup>16</sup> Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, p. 118. Tooze asserts that British audiences heard Waters’s style as ‘a corrupt departure from the “real” thing.’ See Tooze, *The Mojo Man*, p. 162.

<sup>17</sup> For Waters’s British releases, see Muddy Waters, ‘Rollin’ Stone Blues’ b/w ‘Walkin’ Blues’ (Vogue V.2101, 1952); ‘Long Distance Call’ b/w ‘Hello Little Girl’ (Vogue V.2273, 1954); ‘Honey Bee’ b/w ‘Too Young To Know’ (Vogue V.2372, 1955); Muddy Waters with Little Walter, *Mississippi Blues* (Vogue EP 1046, 1955); Muddy Waters, *Mississippi Blues* (London RE-U 1060, 1956). For reviews, see Max Jones, ‘A Page About The Blues’, *Melody Maker*, 10 May 1952, p. 9; Humphrey Lyttelton, ‘[Review of Vogue V.2273]’, *New Musical Express*, 1 April 1955, p. 4; Paul Oliver, ‘Muddy Waters’ Blues’, *Music Mirror*, 2.11 (November 1955), 12-13.

<sup>18</sup> Oliver, ‘Muddy Waters’ Blues’, pp. 12-13.

and 1950 – mirrored the style of his earliest, acoustic recordings made for the Library of Congress in 1941-42. Although these later recordings benefitted from the addition of bassist Ernest ‘Big’ Crawford, their focus was still on Waters’s vocals and slide guitar, which was now electric but otherwise barely changed. After the 1958 tour, Max Jones was of a similar opinion, arguing that Waters’s playing may have been ‘tough, unpolite, [and] strongly rhythmic’ and therefore similar to contemporary rhythm and blues, but it was nonetheless ‘pure blues...vital, uninhibited and decidedly “Down South”’.<sup>19</sup> Comparisons with Broonzy, too, illustrate Waters’s connection to ‘down-home’, Mississippi blues, despite his more up-to-date elements, at least as much as they detract from perceptions of authenticity. As Jones observed ‘It would be wrong to expect a man of Muddy’s age to sing the blues like Broonzy did...the younger man has a different way with the language.’<sup>20</sup>

Waters’s blues, then, was understood not with the narrow ‘folk’ ideal that later writers have assumed, but largely in terms of a continuity of expression between rural and urban contexts. Schwartz makes a similar assessment of British encounters with rhythm and blues, observing that, despite some critics’ scepticism, the genre’s arrival in Britain ‘challenged the perceptual dichotomy [between] folk authenticity [and] commercial compromise,’ forcing enthusiasts to listen beyond this binary. Instead, blues performers were increasingly attributed to either ‘country’ or ‘city’ schools, with the latter perceived as an outgrowth of the former.<sup>21</sup> In two articles for *Jazz Journal* titled ‘Blues in the Country’ and ‘Blues Up North’, Derrick Stewart-Baxter outlined the relationship between the two styles, drawing on

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<sup>19</sup> Jones, ‘This World of Jazz’, *Melody Maker*, 25 October 1958, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> Jones, ‘This World of Jazz’, *Melody Maker*, 25 October 1958, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, p. 49.

Waters's biography as an example. Waters was 'a genuine product of his sociological background': the way in which his style departed from earlier traditions was a reflection of his city life.<sup>22</sup> The upheaval of migration from the South to the North and the monotony of industrial labour that African Americans' experienced in Chicago became, in Stewart-Baxter's words, 'the raw material of the urban blues'.<sup>23</sup> In particular, he was keen to establish that 'city blues' musicians' commercial success did not affect their status as 'authentic' bluesmen. Singers like Waters did not sever their ties to working people; maintaining this connection was key to their success. As such, Stewart-Baxter asserted, British listeners should not hold musicians like Waters to the same standards as earlier artists like Leroy Carr, Blind Lemon Jefferson, or indeed Big Bill Broonzy. Rather, audiences should recognise the continued relevance of the blues to African Americans' daily lives. After interviewing Waters at length in his London hotel room, Tony Standish evidently took the same view:

Let's face it – Muddy's been in Chicago sixteen years now, and that's a long time out of the country. In America, among his own people, he is a highly successful night club performer and recording artist. Cab drivers, waitresses, factory workers, shop assistants – these, the Negro working people, are the ones who know Muddy Waters['s] Hoochie Coochie Boys and their music. Muddy is recording advisor for Chess and Checker Records, he owns a couple of cars and his own home [...] he has left the country environment behind, for better or worse, and is now a city dweller singing mostly city

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<sup>22</sup> Derrick Stewart-Baxter, 'Blues Up North: Some Observations on City Blues', *Jazz Journal*, 12.6 (June 1959), 31-32, p. 31. The corollary to this article had been published two months earlier. See Derrick Stewart-Baxter, 'Blues in the Country', *Jazz Journal*, 12.4 (April 1959), 3-4.

<sup>23</sup> Stewart-Baxter, 'Blues Up North', p. 31.



songs for city people. The years in the south produced the style and the accent but the city and good money have influenced, irrevocably, the material.<sup>24</sup>

At the heart of British ideas of the continuity between rural and urban African American expression lay the ‘sociological’ approach to the blues that had emerged in the 1940s (see chapter 3) and was now being extended in contemporary criticism, particularly in the work of collector-turned-researcher Paul Oliver. As Christian O’Connell has argued, Oliver located the blues’s wide variety of cultural reference in a single, overarching source: African Americans’ marginalised social status in twentieth-century America.<sup>25</sup> ‘[The blues] has evolved’, explained Oliver in his 1960 book *Blues Fell This Morning*

from the peculiar dilemma in which a particular group, isolated by its skin pigmentation [...] finds itself when required to conform to a society which yet refuses its full integration within it.’<sup>26</sup>

In Oliver’s mind, the blues was not specific to a particular region or group, nor did it have a defining set of musical characteristics; rather, the blues was determined by the social and economic position of its performers and audiences relative to white American society.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Standish, ‘Muddy Waters in London (Part 2)’, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Christian O’Connell, “‘The British Bluesman’: Paul Oliver and the Nature of Transatlantic Blues Scholarship” (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Gloucestershire, 2013), p. 89.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: The Meaning of the Blues* (London: Cassell, 1960), p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> Oliver would write that the blues was ‘sung and played in districts that are literally thousands of miles apart where widely differing social, economic, physical and climatic conditions prevail...it is a music that is common to persons living under the most primitive rural circumstances and in the high pressure of modern city life.’ See Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, p. 4.

Oliver's conceptualisation of blues's relationship to African American experience built on recent sociological research, as well as the literary work of African American novelist and critic Richard Wright, whom Oliver had met in Paris and subsequently corresponded with during the 1950s.<sup>28</sup> By hearing African American expressive culture as a reaction against structural oppression, Oliver's approach circumvented debates around the (in)authenticity of modern blues. '[Waters] sings the tough, confident, exhilarating blues of the modern Negro,' Oliver would write in his own programme notes for Waters's national tour with Chris Barber's Jazz Band.

For countless Negro domestic workers and factory hands, truck drivers and bell hops, railroad porters and shop assistants and their kinfolk who buy his records, sing and dance and listen to his music[,] Muddy Waters's blues have meaning.<sup>29</sup>

Even as a professional entertainer, Waters's music remained 'authentic' due to its relevance to urban black life.

Importantly, British enthusiasts' embrace of Waters's urban blues and its sociological implications renewed elements of revivalist thinking, portraying 'authentic' blues – in both rural and urban manifestations – as a tradition under threat from commercial interests and appropriation by white 'pop' musicians. If traditional jazz's 1940s adversaries had been the swing band and the radio orchestra, by the late 1950s the enemy was American rock 'n' roll and British teen idols like Tommy Steele and Cliff Richard. These performers' music had identifiable origins

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<sup>28</sup> Christian O'Connell, *Blues, How Do You Do?: Paul Oliver and the Transatlantic Story of the Blues* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), p. 33.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Oliver, 'Muddy Waters', in 'Chris Barber's Jazz Band with Otilie Patterson and Muddy Waters', tour programme, National Jazz Federation, 18-27 October 1958. The similarity of Oliver's phrasing to Standish's words, quoted above, suggests that Standish had read Oliver's writing on Waters.

in the blues, rhythm and blues, and boogie-woogie, but their public image was wholesome and safe, designed to capture the indiscriminating ear of the teenage market.<sup>30</sup> But while earlier jazz revivalism was able to lionise New Orleans jazz as a lost or fading musical tradition, such a nostalgic perspective could not easily be applied to the blues without overlooking the genre's more modern, urban elements.

Derrick Stewart-Baxter railed against this conceit in a 1960 column for *Jazz Journal*:

If ever there was proof that the blues are very much alive[,] Muddy is it [...] it is such men [...] who are keeping the blues alive, giving the lie to the critics who have told us so shrilly that So-and-So is the last of the great blues men. Rubbish!

The inapplicability of the standard revivalist position arguably gave rise to a greater sensitivity to notions of cultural ownership. Stewart-Baxter reasoned that although it was incorrect to argue that commercialism was destroying once great cultural traditions – the blues was still clearly very much ‘alive’ – there was still a point to be made regarding the extent to which white musicians gained materially by emulating African American culture. As Stewart-Baxter observed,

In all styles [urban or rural] there are singers who should be great blues stars, but through neglect are allowed to drift into obscurity while the white rock-'n'-rollers reap a rich harvest.<sup>31</sup>

This perspective was echoed by Waters himself, too, who commented in an interview with Tony Standish that rock 'n' roll star Elvis Presley was merely a

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<sup>30</sup> Gillian A. M. Mitchell, 'From "Rock" to "Beat": Towards a Reappraisal of British Popular Music, 1958-1962', *Popular Music and Society*, 36.2 (2013), 194-215, pp. 199-201. Public anxieties around the anti-social behaviour associated with teenage enthusiasm for rock 'n' roll also added to revivalist impressions of pop fans' uncultivated tastes to a certain extent. As Mitchell notes, however, fears of rioting teenagers on Britain's streets were short-lived. It was pop music's sanitising effect was therefore revivalists' primary concern.

<sup>31</sup> Derrick Stewart-Baxter, 'Blues on Record', *Jazz Journal*, 13.1 (January 1960), 13.

‘copycat’; nevertheless, Waters considered playing down his own dancing for fear audiences would think he had copied Presley.<sup>32</sup>

If urban blues was not immune from commercial forces, British enthusiasts aimed to insulate it from the deleterious effects of the wider entertainment industry through their patronage. As such, the consensus following Waters’s tour was that British audiences had allowed him to present himself as he would have done at home in Chicago. Waters’s reception, in other words, derived from audiences’ perception that they were observing the ‘real thing’ without external hindrance. As I will show in the next section, however, British audiences’ desire to hear a true ‘Chicago South Side blues performance in London’ buffeted against the requirements of collaboration and exchange in the contemporary mechanisms that allowed musicians to tour.

### **Transatlantic Collaborations in the Context of the ‘Exchange Economy’**

During the early 1950s, numerous attempts were made to circumvent restrictions on visits by foreign musicians.<sup>33</sup> The jazz world was almost unanimously opposed to these regulations, believing that increased exposure to American performers would stimulate British jazz, creating not losing jobs. The American Federation of Musicians (AFM) was as averse to visitors as the British Musicians’ Union, however, meaning that the only hope lay in a reciprocal agreement. This seemed unlikely: few, if any, British bands could have commanded audiences in the United

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<sup>32</sup> Standish, ‘Muddy Waters in London (Part 2)’, p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> One notable workaround floated was an idea to host Louis Armstrong and his band on a boat in the Irish Sea. See Godbolt, *A History of Jazz in Britain, 1950-70*, pp. 168-169.

States akin to those for their American counterparts in Britain.<sup>34</sup> Yet over time ‘the ban’ was progressively eroded by a number of enterprising British and American promoters. In 1953, Norman Granz successfully organised two British concerts, ostensibly in support of flood relief in East Anglia, for his ‘Jazz at the Philharmonic’ tour, which was currently on the Continent. As Jim Godbolt points out, this altruism was calculated; neither the Musicians’ Union nor the Ministry of Labour could be seen to be obstructing the relief effort, and the demand awakened for further visits by American bands would be long lasting.<sup>35</sup> Three years later, in 1956, the British promoter Harold Davison successfully secured an exchange agreement with the AFM to present the Stan Kenton Orchestra in Britain, in return for a ‘similar date-for-date [American] tour’ for the Ted Heath Orchestra. This set a precedent for an arrangement that would be repeated with increasing frequency over the remainder of the decade.<sup>36</sup> Already by the end of 1957, Davison’s roster of visiting Americans read like a who’s who of jazz giants: Louis Armstrong, Lionel Hampton, Sidney Bechet, Eddie Condon, George Lewis, Count Basie, Earl Hines, Jack Teagarden, and the Modern Jazz Quartet.<sup>37</sup>

Yet the exchange system was fragile. British bands were routinely programmed to support, and often to perform *with* visiting Americans, meaning that success of a tour came to be measured not just by the visitor(s)’ performances, but also by their interactions with their British host and musical collaborators. In the case of Louis Armstrong, for instance, the obvious appeal of hearing the trumpeter live for the first time in twenty-two years was offset by mounting concerns over how

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<sup>34</sup> Godbolt, *A History of Jazz in Britain, 1950-70*, pp. 166-173, 186. Ernest Borneman, ‘Where Does that Smell Come From?’, *Melody Maker*, 14 February 1948, p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Godbolt, *A History of Jazz in Britain, 1950-70*, pp. 178.

<sup>36</sup> Godbolt, *A History of Jazz in Britain, 1950-70*, pp. 186-187.

<sup>37</sup> Godbolt, *A History of Jazz in Britain, 1950-70*, pp. 199-219.

and where he would be presented. Pat Brand, editor of the *Melody Maker* captured these tensions well:

‘Yes! – Louis is really here!’ So ran the headlines [...] of last week’s *Melody Maker*, ending the uncertainty [...] as to whether the fabulous Armstrong actually would be allowed to play his trumpet in the British Isles. He was really coming! [...] Doubts were stilled. *But the growing anger of the fans was not.* What was promoter Harold Davison doing, booking him into this vast arena [London’s Empress Hall] whose acoustics were [...] extremely suspect[?] And on a revolving stage! What was this – a circus? With ‘supporting’ acts! Why couldn’t Louis fill the whole bill himself? [...] The [British] Vic Lewis Orchestra [...] opened the programme with a selection of “oldies” that were, from my seat, practically inaudible. Then, on to the central stage, stumped [African American vaudeville dancer] Peg Leg Bates [...] For twenty minutes we watched him dance himself into a lather of sweat, then [we] were introduced to [African American singer] Ella Logan. Nobody could fault Miss Logan’s ability as a performer. [But] one could certainly fault the promoters for expecting a singer of ballads to hold a jazz-hungry audience for twenty minutes. And then, at 7.30 p.m., came the All Stars [...] within a few bars of ‘Sleepy Time Down South’ we knew our fears were coming true. The echoing of Barrett Deems’s drums; the almost complete absence of sound from Billy Kyle’s piano and Jack Lesberg’s bass; the fluctuating volume as the front line swung slowly round – towards us, at us and past us. Those who paid twenty-five shillings a seat had every reason to complain.

Brand was dismayed by the gimmickry of Armstrong’s presentation, the superfluous support artists, and the lamentable acoustics of Empress Hall, preferring to hear

Armstrong unadulterated and unadorned.<sup>38</sup> Each of these criticisms he directed at Davison, the promoter. Yet Brand ultimately glossed over these misgivings, perhaps – as Jim Godbolt suggests – not wishing to ‘upset the apple cart’ in the most notable concert by a jazz performer since Armstrong’s *last* visit, in 1934. ‘Is it worth paying [so much] to see and hear Louis? [...] Unhesitatingly, I say yes!’<sup>39</sup>

Faltering collaborations were also perceived to have played a role in earlier, unsuccessful attempts to break the MU ban on visiting musicians, in addition to the Union’s usual intransigence. In 1952, a performance by visiting blues singer and guitarist Lonnie Johnson was almost scuppered by the National Federation of Jazz Organisations’ (NFJO) failure to acquire the correct permission from the Musicians’ Union. Perhaps wary of the Union’s prohibition on visitors, the NFJO had applied directly to the Ministry of Labour which, surprisingly, granted Johnson an entry permit. Perturbed by this attempt to circumvent their restrictions, the Musicians’ Union threatened Johnson’s British accompanists with blacklisting. These musicians, who included Humphrey Lyttelton’s band and the Christie Brothers Stompers, vowed to appear anyway, confident that the newly formed NFJO would intercede with the Union on their behalf. The NFJO did no such thing, obliging Lyttelton et al to withdraw at the eleventh hour; Johnson was forced to perform solo and in a

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<sup>38</sup> Lessons had clearly been learned by the time of Armstrong’s next British tour in 1959. The *Melody Maker* boldly announced the arrival of ‘Armstrong Minus the Circus’, and asserted that ‘it will be a tour with a difference[:] OUT are Variety acts; OUT are “vast auditorium” locations; OUT is the revolving, “merry-go-round” stage gimmick’. See ‘Armstrong Minus the Circus’, *Melody Maker*, 17 January 1959, p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> Pat Brand, ‘Louis at the Empress Hall’, *Melody Maker*, 12 May 1956, pp. 3, 6; quoted in Godbolt, *A History of Jazz in Britain, 1950-70*, pp. 199-200. Godbolt also notes the furore that erupted when British saxophonist Johnny Dankworth, unimpressed by the showmanship of American vibraphonist Lionel Hampton during a November 1956 concert, shouted ‘What about playing some jazz?’ during a lull in the concert. See Godbolt, *A History of Jazz in Britain, 1950-70*, pp. 203-205.

number of under-rehearsed duets with American pianist Ralph Sutton, who was also visiting the UK.<sup>40</sup>

Not all British tours needed an exchange agreement, of course. As discussed earlier, soloists and duos were able to enter the country with greater ease. They would often require accompaniment by British musicians; likewise, it was rare for a single musician to command an entire concert, meaning that visiting American(s) provided an added draw to concerts of British bands. Nevertheless, an awareness of the ‘exchange economy’ after 1956 and the attendant need to host and present a visiting artist appropriately was often vital to a successful tour. Muddy Waters’s 1958 tour was no exception. While Chris Barber has often been credited with organising it, Harold Davison’s role in arranging for Waters’s debut to take place at the Leeds Centenary Musical Festival should not be overlooked.<sup>41</sup> The festival was a mainstay of British classical music, but local nobleman and jazz critic Gerald Lascelles (the 6th Earl of Harewood) had organised a week of high-profile jazz concerts, in recognition of the festival’s centenary.<sup>42</sup> Described by the *Melody Maker* as ‘the most ambitious week of jazz ever planned by a British city’, the festival’s twelve jazz concerts each featured an American guest soloist or ensemble alongside

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<sup>40</sup> Godbolt, *A History of Jazz in Britain, 1950-70*, pp. 174-176.

<sup>41</sup> ‘Muddy Waters on Leeds Bill’, *Melody Maker*, 16 August 1958, p. 16. Davison may have had an even wider role: a September 1958 announcement in *Disc* magazine reported that Davison had organised the entire visit, while Waters’s later regional tour dates were ‘promoted locally’ by several other organisations including Barber and Pendleton’s National Jazz Federation, Jazzshows, and the Manchester-based promoter Paddy McKiernan. See ‘Dates Fixed for Waters’, *Disc*, 27 September 1958, p. 10.

<sup>42</sup> The idea that Waters’s Leeds performances were an afterthought is not supported by documentary evidence. Not only was Waters’s appearance at Leeds the first element of his visit to be publicly advertised, but also Waters’s *four* concerts over two days, as part of a week’s programming, suggests that this element of the visit itinerary was far from last minute. See ‘Muddy Waters On Leeds Bill’. Gerald Lascelles was a regular contributor to *Jazz Journal*, and was co-editor (with Sinclair Truill) of *Just Jazz*, a series of yearbooks published between 1956 and 1959.



a group of leading British musicians. The week began with two concerts by Duke Ellington's Orchestra, their first time in Britain in over twenty years. Four concerts by British saxophonist Johnny Dankworth and his Orchestra followed, with American blues singer Jimmy Rushing taking the second half accompanied by British trumpeter Humphrey Lyttelton and his band.<sup>43</sup> Waters's concerts, at the end of the week, were shared with an 'all-star' group of British jazz musicians, the Jazz Today Unit.<sup>44</sup> This group aimed to capture the spontaneity of modern jazz by avoiding all rehearsal or premeditation aside from a 'band call' before the first concert to 'work out the order of the programme, the keys in which numbers are to be played, and possibly to sketch in a basic riff sequence for behind solos.'<sup>45</sup>

While the festival audience as a whole was more accustomed to Britten than the blues, the decision to feature jazz concerts in the centenary year suggests an attempt not only to promote the acceptance of jazz by the British cultural establishment, but also to herald the benefits of relaxing the rules on visiting

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<sup>43</sup> It is notable that Rushing's presence in Britain - almost exactly contemporary with Waters's visit - has been ignored altogether in accounts of Waters's UK visit. His British tours in 1957 and 1958 were well received and uncontroversial, but this is arguably because he has never been heard to be central to the blues tradition like Waters. Rather, as Stanley Dance described him in the programme notes to Rushing's Leeds concert, Rushing was 'a blues singer who nearly always works within a jazz context.' See Stanley Dance, 'Jimmy Rushing', in 'Jonny Dankworth and His Orchestra, Humphrey Lyttelton and his Band, [and] Jimmy Rushing', Concert Programme, Leeds Centenary Musical Festival, Odeon Theatre, Leeds, 14-15 October 1958, n.p.

<sup>44</sup> Ronald Boyle, 'Just Who is in this Jazz Today Unit?', *Yorkshire Post*, 13 October 1958, p. 8. Although many writers have assumed that the Jazz Today Unit accompanied Waters during their Leeds concerts, there is no evidence to support this. Rather, as Ronald Boyle pointed out at the time, the Jazz Today Unit took the first half of the concert, with Waters and Spann appearing in the second half. When discussing the first Leeds concert, Boyle points out that when Waters was performing, 'the only other man on the stage was his pianist.' See Boyle, 'Muddy Waters and his blues'.

<sup>45</sup> Boyle, 'Just Who is in this Jazz Today Unit?'.

musicians.<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, Waters's concert failed to live up to these high expectations. Both Waters and the Jazz Today Unit were hampered by feedback and poor microphone placement.<sup>47</sup> Despite the organisers' faith in the 'tremendous possibilities' of spontaneous performance, the Jazz Today Unit fell into disarray, with missed cues, lengthy 'dead time' between numbers, and lacklustre ensemble playing. 'I know that jazz is supposed to be an unconventional, impromptu mode of expression, but there are some limitations', lamented Ronald Boyle. The *Melody Maker* was more acerbic, condemning the Jazz Today Unit for 'the worst concert by a professional jazz group [...] ever seen.'<sup>48</sup>

While the logistical issues with Waters's Leeds debut caused a degree of embarrassment, there were also more deep-seated tensions in British and American collaborations. Blues enthusiasts heard Waters to encapsulate 'authentic' urban blues, yet – as I have explained – the vitality of African American music was sustained by its isolation from white, mainstream culture. This perception was at odds with an exchange economy that relied on visiting musicians collaborating with British musicians, as can be heard in Waters's concert in Manchester with the Chris Barber band. Although Barber's whole band join Waters only for the first and last numbers of his set, the drummer and bassist provide a rudimentary rhythmic accompaniment throughout. Yet even this limited interaction with too much of a

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<sup>46</sup> There was, for instance, much excitement at the prospect that the Queen herself would attend one of the week's jazz concerts. This was initially expected to be Waters's performance on Friday 17th. See 'Queen to Hear Jazz at Leeds', *Melody Maker*, 11 October 1958, p. 9. The Queen eventually attended the theatre instead, but she met Ellington later during an official visit to Harewood House.

<sup>47</sup> 'Critics Blast Leeds Jazz Concert', *Melody Maker*, 25 October 1958, p. 9; Boyle, 'Muddy Waters and his Blues'. When Boyle reviewed Waters's second concert the following day, he noted that there had been 'more attention to microphone placing and tuning'. See Ronald Boyle, 'Greatest Jazz So Far', *Yorkshire Post*, 18 October 1958, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Boyle, 'Muddy Waters and His Blues'; 'Critics Blast Leeds Jazz Concert'

departure from the ‘real thing’ for one fan. When Waters deliberates between numbers over who should accompany him on ‘I Can’t Be Satisfied’ (Sound Ex. 4.1) – his first professional solo record and one that significantly foregrounds his bottleneck slide guitar – an audience member shouts ‘kick the drummer off!’ Presumably this listener wanted to hear Waters play the number as it could be heard on disc, rather than impeded by unnecessary accompaniment.<sup>49</sup>

The Barber band hold a central, yet contested position in British interest in African American music. Since their formation in 1954 out of the ashes of the Ken Colyer’s more fiercely traditional Jazzmen, Barber’s group had courted popularity among young, working and lower-middle class teenagers with their ‘careful presentation [...] lively sense of the audience, originality in choice of material and attention to detail’, in the words of Dave Gelly.<sup>50</sup> In contrast to groups like Colyer’s, Barber’s band performed a wider repertoire, from sea shanties to Duke Ellington, in a broadly traditional style as well as standard revivalist fare. The addition of blues vocalist Otilie Patterson in 1955 cemented the band as one of Britain’s most popular jazz ensembles. Barber recalls how

it got to the point in 1955 when it seemed as if we couldn’t do any wrong [...] that year and for some years afterwards, you didn’t ask yourself, ‘Is there a good crowd here?’ Because there was always was. Everywhere [...] In due course, we were offered the maximum size of halls to play in [...] in

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<sup>49</sup> Waters’s recording of ‘I Can’t Be Satisfied’ features a bass accompaniment. This is perhaps why the audience member does not complain specifically about the presence of the bass.

<sup>50</sup> David Gelly, *An Unholy Row: Jazz in Britain and its Audience, 1945-1960* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2014), p. 62.

1955 we had played [the 3,000 seater Newcastle City Hall] [...] five times, all sold out.<sup>51</sup>

The band also had their own radio show on the BBC Light Programme, *Chris Barber's Bandbox*, and were regulars on the BBC TV show *Six-Five Special*.<sup>52</sup>

Nevertheless, the band's popular success could attract scepticism. In a 1960 article in *Jazz Journal*, traditionalist critic James Asman complained that the band had 'simplified and standardised New Orleans music and blues for general digestion'. Their popularity had caused them to cling to a pale imitation of African American music. 'There has never been a single artist', he contended, 'who has been able to woo "pop" approval without sacrificing something integral from the original'.<sup>53</sup> Asman's comments illustrate the concern for authenticity discussed earlier: that the success of white imitators would limit audiences' abilities to distinguish the 'real' from the ersatz. 'Real' blues, to Asman's ears, could be played only by musicians with

a natural background [...] based on the native folk music behind jazz proper [...] That is why a New Orleans street crier sounds like a deep Mississippi blues singer, why the coloured Harlem rock 'n' roller has direct links with urban blues-making from the same source and why, even in the Negro churches, one can hear a tailgate trombone, a ragtime piano or a rhythm-and-

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<sup>51</sup> Chris Barber with Alyn Shipton, *Jazz Me Blues: The Autobiography of Chris Barber* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2014), pp. 38-40. While it is important to be aware that Barber may be overstating his success, this is unlikely, as Barber concludes soon after that this level of success dropped off significantly after 1961. See Barber, *Jazz Me Blues*, p. 40.

<sup>52</sup> See Barber, *Jazz Me Blues*, p. 38, 54.

<sup>53</sup> James Asman, 'The Chris Barber Band', *Jazz Journal*, 13.2 (February 1960), pp. 3-4, 40.

blues guitar. All this is the natural site upon which jazz, as a native music, builds and rebuilds itself.<sup>54</sup>

Although Asman does not go so far as to invest African Americans' performance prowess in a 'natural aptitude', he was nevertheless insistent on a high level of acculturated understanding, identifying an all-encompassing cultural sensibility across multiple traditions of black musical expression. British jazz in contrast, Asman argues,

is composed of youngsters, green both in age and in experience [...] Too many possess but a fleeting sympathy with jazz proper and more have completely neglected the essential study of Afro-American folk music which has always provided the instinctive accent to the language of jazz improvisation.<sup>55</sup>

It is somewhat ironic that Asman should have chosen the Barber band as an example with which to illustrate his misgivings about British jazz.<sup>56</sup> Key to the band's success was their dedication to performing urban blues. Barber was a keen record collector, importing many from the United States; Patterson, too, spent many hours throughout the 1950s transcribing lyrics and learning blues songs from recordings.<sup>57</sup> Her scrapbooks, which survive in the Otilie Patterson Collection at the National Jazz Archive, document these efforts. Her scrapbook for 1951-52, dating from when Patterson was a student and an art teacher in Northern Ireland, contains – transcribed in delicate calligraphy – the lyrics of a number of recordings by Bessie

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<sup>54</sup> Asman, 'The Chris Barber Band', p. 4.

<sup>55</sup> Asman, 'The Chris Barber Band', p. 4.

<sup>56</sup> It is ironic, too, that Asman should make these arguments having so vociferously promoted the abilities of a similarly young and inexperienced group of British jazz musicians, George Webb's Dixielanders, nearly two decades earlier (see chapter 2).

<sup>57</sup> For more on Patterson's early musical influences, see Mike Pointon, 'Spotlight on Otilie Patterson (Part 1)', *Just Jazz*, 199, (March 2008), 3-6. For Barber's record collecting, see Barber, *Jazz Me Blues*, p. 7-8.

Smith including 'Backwater Blues', 'Nobody Knows You When You're Down And Out', 'St. Louis Blues' and 'Careless Love'.<sup>58</sup> Although the second scrapbook in the collection contains press cuttings from Patterson's involvement with the Barber band, the third scrapbook appears to have been Patterson's 'working' lyrics book for rehearsals and performances during the mid-late 1950s. Lacking the singer's elegant calligraphy, the book contains a wealth of blues lyrics, many of which also include performance directions and keys relating to Patterson's performances with the Barber band. Importantly, the repertoire contained in the scrapbook demonstrates a keen knowledge of contemporary urban blues and R&B. While early blues vocalists and prewar 'race' artists still feature, as can be seen by the transcriptions of 'Trixie's Blues' by Trixie Smith, 'Kid Man' by pianist Big Maceo, or 'Blues Before Sunrise' by pianist Leroy Carr, the majority of transcriptions are of songs by R&B singer Ruth Brown, including 'Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean', 'It's All Over', and 'As Long As I'm Moving'. The scrapbook also documents Patterson's own forays into blues lyric composition, including her song 'Bad Spell Blues', as well as drafts of another song called 'I'm Crying My Heart Out For You'.<sup>59</sup> By 1957, Patterson's interest in the blues had spread to the Barber band's concert sets. They increasingly featured urban blues songs, including those by Muddy Waters and Willie Dixon, as well numbers by Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Minnie, and Hound Dog Taylor.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Otilie Patterson, Notebook 1951-1952, National Jazz Archive, Otilie Patterson Collection, Box 1, Item 2. Patterson also used her first scrapbook to make notes about New Orleans jazz history and document her attendance at jazz gigs in Northern Ireland and, later, in London.

<sup>59</sup> Otilie Patterson, Diary/scrapbook 1960s [c. 1956 onwards], NJA, Otilie Patterson Collection, Box 2, Item 4. This scrapbook also contains the lyrics to Bessie Smith's 'Backwater Blues', two songs by Chicago blues harmonica player and Muddy Waters band member Little Walter, as well as numerous examples of doggerel poetry, doodles, and an autobiographical sketch of her experiences of 1959.

<sup>60</sup> Barber, *Jazz Me Blues*, p. 47.

Most notably, the Barber band also gained a reputation for accompanying visiting musicians: they toured with Big Bill Broonzy during his 1954 and 1957 tours, and brought African American gospel singer Sister Rosetta Tharpe on two 1957 tours, and Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee on one the following year. Barber would recall in his autobiography:

we wanted a chance to work with real blues people, people whose music this was. They can teach you without really trying because they play things *right*, the way it's supposed to be done. If you play things wrongly, it sticks out like a sore thumb. You can feel it immediately.<sup>61</sup>

Here, Barber indicates his own belief in African Americans' acculturated knowledge of blues performance, which he depicts as a form of ownership. Nevertheless, it is clear that he also believed that 'sincere' white British musicians such as Patterson and himself could learn from this model.

Scholars have typically interpreted the frequency with which the Barber band accompanied visiting blues musicians as a product of necessity given prevailing restrictions on foreign musicians' touring activities. As I have noted above, musicians could only tour as soloists or with a single accompanist and therefore often needed to collaborate with British musicians to deliver their shows.<sup>62</sup> Yet this interpretation overlooks the extent to which Barber's band sought to capitalise on opportunities for collaboration and interaction when touring with American visitors. During Waters's 1958 tour, for example, concerts would often finish with a performance combining both visitors and hosts. At the Manchester Free Trade Hall concert, the band reprise one of Waters's recent hits, 'Walkin' Thru The Park', to bring the evening to a close (Sound Ex. 4.2). Waters and Patterson trade verses of

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<sup>61</sup> Barber, *Jazz Me Blues*, p. 43.

<sup>62</sup> Schwartz, *How Britain Got The Blues*, p. 76.

the song, introducing new lyrics that did not appear in the earlier performance or in Waters's existing recording of the song.<sup>63</sup> Barber recalls similar final numbers in concerts with other visiting musicians, such as folk blues duo Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee earlier the same year, or gospel singer Sister Rosetta Tharpe the year before.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, he perceives such collaborations as valuable to both host and visitor alike: while the Barber band got the opportunity to perform with top-flight African American musicians, visitors were often surprised and encouraged by the band's interest in their music and efforts to accompany them. Barber recalls the opening night of Waters's nationwide tour, for instance:

As [Waters and Spann] came on stage we played the opening riff [of 'Hoochie Coochie Man']. Their faces lit up [...] they knew at once we were on their wavelength [...] they hadn't expected us to know or care about their music.<sup>65</sup>

Although Barber has an obvious interest in his band appearing competent and welcoming, his perception of musical collaboration as a form of cultural sensitivity and a sign of dedication and understanding is a useful insight. While the Barber band's emulation of urban blues and their collaborations with visiting musicians might have been interpreted as forms of appropriation by critics like Asman due to the band's popular appeal, it is also possible that the musicians involved in these interactions saw them in more earnest terms. Muddy Waters, at least, seemed satisfied with his accompanists' abilities and their approach to collaboration. He noted in his interviews with Tony Standish:

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<sup>63</sup> Waters's Manchester concerts with the Barber band were recorded. See Muddy Waters [with Chris Barber's Jazz Band], *Muddy Waters in Concert 1958* (Krazy Kat LP 7405, 1982).

<sup>64</sup> Barber, *Jazz Me Blues*, pp. 51-54.

<sup>65</sup> Barber, *Jazz Me Blues*, pp. 55-56.



Chris Barber[:] He is a *wonderful* guy [...] they should put him on top shelf because he's able to play the type of stuff we wanta [sic] hear an' he *plays* it [...] I could work with him six months – those cats [the band] wail like coloured people. They're a bunch of wonderful guys and any way they can help you, that's what they wanta do. And I like that.<sup>66</sup>

Waters's praise for Barber and his group most obviously demonstrates the singer's high regard for their musical abilities; his likening of their performance to the idealised status of playing 'like coloured people' is most notable. But what is also significant is Waters's awareness of the band's desire to 'help' a visiting performer in concert.

African American visitors' tours were flashpoints of international and interracial musical encounter. On the one hand, they provided opportunities for British musicians to play with their idols, and to affirm their dedication to the blues; on the other, they became moments where deep-seated anxieties about the authenticity of British jazz and the viability of contemporary touring arrangements rose to the surface. While British audiences wanted to hear performances akin to those an African American audience would, visitors' British performances were highly mediated by the necessities of the 'exchange economy'. Nevertheless, as Waters's comments about the Barber band suggest, interactions between visiting blues musicians and their hosts were positive. But if we are to gain a proper understanding of the politics of transatlantic blues performance under the 'exchange economy', we must attend likewise to the return legs: the westbound movements of music, people, and ideas across the Atlantic that balanced the eastbound.

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<sup>66</sup> Standish, 'Muddy Waters in London (Part 2)'. Emphasis in original.

## **‘What’s On In America?’: Chris Barber’s Jazz Band’s Tours of the United States**

In 1959, Chris Barber’s Jazz Band made two tours of North America, performing at college campuses, state fairs, and civic auditoriums. During their first tour the band also appeared on American TV, on the *Ed Sullivan Show* and *American Bandstand*, while their second tour swapped TV appearances for high-profile concerts at the Monterey Jazz Festival, and for the New Orleans Jazz Club.<sup>67</sup> The band’s first tour was most immediately the product of the new exchange system, arranged in return for British tours for swing bandleader Woody Herman, as well as the New Orleans clarinetist George Lewis.<sup>68</sup> The Barber band’s tour was also bolstered by the international success of one of their recordings, a cover of Sidney Bechet’s 1952 saxophone instrumental, ‘Petite Fleur’. Although Monty Sunshine recorded his version with Barber’s band in 1956, it was not released in the US for a couple of years. Steadily climbing the charts, ‘Fleur’ reached No. 2 on *Variety* magazine’s pop listings by the mid-point of the tour, and by the beginning of March 1959 had topped 1 million sales.<sup>69</sup>

Promotional material for Barber’s first American tour emphasised the band’s enthusiasm and sincerity, in much the same way as in Britain. ‘When Chris Barber plays’, wrote British critic Brian Nicholls in the programme,

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<sup>67</sup> Barber’s band would undertake a third tour in 1960, but this chapter will focus on their first and second tours.

<sup>68</sup> Jon Williamson, [Interview with Chris Barber for The Musicians’ Union: A Social History Project], Edinburgh, 26 July 2013, pp. 7-8. I would like to thank Jon Williamson for sharing the text of this interview with me.

<sup>69</sup> ‘America’s Top Discs’, *Melody Maker*, 28 February 1959, p. 6. The Barber band’s appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* on March 8, 1959, which was watched by an estimated 20 million American viewers, saw the band awarded an RIAA ‘gold disc’. See ‘Chris Barber Gets Gold Record’, *Melody Maker*, 14 March 1959, p. 1.

he creates an atmosphere of goodwill towards the rugged and often primitive jazz that he makes [...] the band's greatest asset is its enthusiasm, for they are all young and boundlessly happy at being allowed to earn a good living playing the music they love.<sup>70</sup>

Their appearances were pitched at a similar youth demographic, too, appearing primarily on college campuses. Eager to draw attention to this parallel, Nicholls described traditional jazz appreciation in Britain as an outgrowth of young people's leisure pursuits, highlighting its beginnings

with a small, unorganised group of youngsters, not long out of school, and mostly looking like Chris Barber [...] [who] bought, stole or hired instruments and sat down in the back rooms of Church Halls and bars to annoy the neighbours and recreate the music of New Orleans.'

Jazz clearly retained some whiff of immorality, through both its historical associations and its recent connection to rock 'n' roll. Yet teenage rebellion appears to have been channelled in the jazz revival into a more wholesome vision of youth culture.

Interesting, too, is Nicholls's emphasis on jazz's international acceptance. While America's primary exports, 'Western films and Coca Cola', were 'strongest at home', jazz was 'strongest away from its birthplace':

in Britain, in France, in Germany and Sweden; in Denmark and in Poland and in such an unlikely place as Japan, jazz has found respectability and its place in the sun.

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<sup>70</sup> This citation and subsequent quotes from Nicholls's programme notes, see Brian Nicholls, 'Here Is Chris Barber', in 'Introducing Chris Barber', concert programme, c. February 1959, *The Barber-Purser Archives* <<https://www.chrisbarber.net/tours-concerts/ustour59-home.htm>> [accessed 18 December 2017].

More than platitudes, Nicholls's observations elide jazz's multicultural – and multiracial – appeal with the fresh-faced Barber band's 'traditional' style, and in turn with the youth culture of cinema and 'Coke'.<sup>71</sup> Their music, then, possessed qualities of mobility, facilitated by the band's personability and enthusiasm.

These qualities can arguably be heard in the group's hit record, 'Petite Fleur': a showcase for the band's clarinetist Monty Sunshine, whose vibrato-heavy melody is underpinned by a gently chugging guitar. The bridge offers a bright and jaunty contrast, as the tonality shifts to a more resolute major key and the walking double bass enters. Soon, the enigmatic feel of the opening returns, with a reverb-laden guitar solo that echoes Sunshine's haunting clarinet sound. The recording sums up the band's approach to music making, described by Barber during the first US tour as 'humour, pathos and melody'.<sup>72</sup> What is more, the song is a hybrid: composed and recorded in France by Bechet, an American Creole, then covered by a British band in a caricatured, 'gypsy jazz' style, and later sold in the United States for consumption by American teenagers.

As clean-cut exponents of internationally successful traditional jazz, the Barber band on their American tours took on an ambassadorial function. During the second tour, the group performed at the New Orleans Jazz Club's '11th Annual Jazz Concert'. The concert aimed to present 'the complete jazz story', in keeping with the club's mission to 'promote and preserve New Orleans jazz' through concerts, written criticism, and radio broadcasts.<sup>73</sup> First on the bill was a group led by the New

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<sup>71</sup> Indeed, the subject of Nicholls's sentence here is not 'jazz', but rather 'the music that [Barber] symbolises and represents'.

<sup>72</sup> Chris Barber, 'U.S audiences are great', *Melody Maker*, March 28, 1959, p. 4.

<sup>73</sup> Peter Miller, 'Visitors and Friends Welcome', in 11th Annual Jazz Concert [concert programme], New Orleans Jazz Club, Municipal Auditorium, New Orleans, 26 October 1959, *The Barber-Purser Archives*,

Orleans jazz drummer Paul Barbarin, a pioneer who had grown up in the city and worked with King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, and Jelly Roll Morton. Then followed two bands – their leaders the same age – illustrating the continued vitality of ‘New Orleans jazz’ within the United States and abroad: Barber’s group, and one led by New Orleans clarinetist Pete Fountain. The circularity of jazz configured by the concert is illustrated by the fact that Barber’s band regularly performed ‘Bourbon Street Parade’, one of Paul Barbarin’s most well-known compositions, as their opening number.<sup>74</sup> Likewise, the combination of British and American performers onstage mirrors practices for hosting visitors in the UK.

The concert’s ambassadorial tenets were cemented by its timing to coincide with ‘International Week’, a municipal festival celebrating global trade and culture. Prior to their set, the band were formally introduced by the British Consul General, A. G. Maitland; Barber was presented a ‘key to the city’ and made an honorary citizen by New Orleans’s Mayor and Council.<sup>75</sup> *Jazz Journal* in the UK printed a report by the revivalist critic Edmond Souchon who edited the New Orleans Jazz Club’s magazine *The Second Line*. Decrying the British preoccupation with exacting distinctions between ‘New Orleans’, ‘Dixieland’, ‘Chicago’, or ‘New York’ style jazz, Souchon vindicated the Barber band’s more catholic approach by aligning it with that in New Orleans:

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<<http://www.northernlite.ca/barbersite/archives/us-tour-1959-home.htm>> [accessed 18 December 2017].

<sup>74</sup> 11th Annual Jazz Concert [concert programme]. Barber notes that the band’s recordings of this song are likely to have made Barbarin ‘a sizeable amount’ in royalties. See Barber, *Jazz Me Blues*, p. 80

<sup>75</sup> 11th Annual Jazz Concert [concert programme]; Certificate awarding Chris Barber ‘Honorary Citizen of New Orleans’, *The Barber-Purser Archives*, <<https://www.chrisbarber.net/tours-concerts/n-o-cert.htm>> [accessed 18 December 2017].

In reaching the decision to invite the Barber band to New Orleans [...] not once did anyone adopt an attitude [...] which seems to predominate strongly in England – of ‘Oh! He doesn't play like George Lewis’ or, ‘His style is too “Chicago”[.]’ [...] Chris was invited because he played mighty good jazz music [...] It is a pleasant duty to inform you that Barber was truly a great ambassador for England. These were gentlemen you sent us. They behaved in a manner with which their most severe critics could have found no fault. They were polished in their stage demeanour, and off-stage their behaviour was exemplary. And their music was not only exactly what we hoped for, but even much, much finer.<sup>76</sup>

Souchon positions the New Orleans Jazz Club as a bastion of musical ecumenicalism, insisting that local revivalists did not make firm distinctions between different styles; the Barber band mirrored his ideas about the appropriate direction for jazz. Souchon's statements about the musicians' good behaviour may also be interpreted as an endorsement of the band's spirit, specifically the qualities of sincerity and dedication that were associated with them.<sup>77</sup>

The Barber band's position as both ambassadors of British jazz and representatives of New Orleans jazz's internationalism in fact feels rather staged. References to the band's sincerity and dedication have a tokenistic air. Their polished image, exacting standards, and wholesomeness are out of line with the

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<sup>76</sup> Edmond Souchon, ‘Chris Barber's Band in New Orleans’, *Jazz Journal*, 13.2 (February 1960), 1-2.

<sup>77</sup> Jazz critic Bob Morris wrote in *The Second Line* of the Barber band: ‘If you had to single out the key characteristic of the Barber crew, it would be this: Dedication. To a man, they are dedicated to the very heart of jazz.’ See Bob Morris, ‘Chris Barber’, *Second Line*, 9.9-10 (September-October 1959), 1-2. Souchon's comments can also be read in the context of the New Orleans Jazz Club's broader aim to cultivate a ‘respectable’ space for jazz appreciation in late-1950s New Orleans, a city whose entertainment industry was at that time orientated around providing diversions for sailors on shore leave.

visceral, subaltern power and aversion to standardisation for which jazz was once lionised by revivalists. Indeed, despite the limits of Asman's criticisms discussed above, his accusation that the Barber band's success came by sanitising black music for white consumption ring true here. At the same time, it is important to understand the value that the band's ambassadorial status had both for the band members themselves, as well as the American musicians and enthusiasts that they interacted with.

### **Ambassadors of the Blues: Chris Barber and Otilie Patterson's Interactions with Chicago Blues Musicians**

Throughout their American tours, the Barber band kept a series of 'travelogues' about their activities, which were subsequently published in their fan club's magazine. The band emphasised their physical and musical mobility by documenting both the places they went and the musicians they met and performed with.<sup>78</sup> In major cities, they made a point of visiting well-known clubs such as Jimmy Ryan's and the Metropole Café in New York, where they sat in with musicians like J. C. Higginbotham, Henry 'Red' Allen, and Buster Bailey.<sup>79</sup> On the road, too, Barber kept a meticulous record of the distances covered between engagements. These writings reveal an air of discovery: not only were the band navigating vast swathes of the United States by road, but on their way they were meeting musicians whom

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<sup>78</sup> See Otilie Patterson, 'Otilie's American Diary', *Chris Barber Club*, 4.3 (March 1959), n.p.; Chris Barber, "'What's On in America': The Diary of a Six Week Tour', *The Barber-Purser Archives*, <<http://www.northernlite.ca/barbersite/archives/us-tour-1959-home.htm>> [accessed 18 December 2017]. This travelogue would later be written up by the band's banjo player, Keith Lightbody. See 'The Complete Story of the Second American Tour', *Chris Barber Club*, 6.1 (December 1959), n.p..

<sup>79</sup> See Patterson, 'Otilie's American Diary'; Chris Barber, 'U.S Audiences are Great', *Melody Maker*, 28 March 1959, p. 4; and Chris Barber, "'What's On in America'".

they – and their British readers – knew only from record sleeves and discographies. As ‘ambassadors’ of British jazz, the Barber band had not only musical but also diplomatic goals: their tours were an exercise in musical sightseeing that connected American idols with their British followers, who in turn reported back to their fans through club publications and the musical press.

The band’s travelogues for both tours focus in particular on their reconnection with Muddy Waters. Although not booked to play in Chicago on their first tour, they visited the city and made time to hear Waters’s band perform, first at Smitty’s Corner on Chicago’s South Side, and then at the F&J Lounge in Gary, Indiana, southeast of Chicago.<sup>80</sup> During their second tour, Barber and Patterson stopped off in Chicago again, hearing – and sitting in with – Waters’s band on three separate occasions.<sup>81</sup> These visits exposed Barber and Patterson to a broader network of Chicago blues musicians, who would also ‘sit in’ during the gigs.<sup>82</sup> Writing in the *Melody Maker* and in the *Chris Barber Club* magazine during the tour, Barber described hearing harmonica player Little Walter, pianist Little Brother Montgomery, guitarist Robert Lockwood, and vocalist Minnie Thomas.<sup>83</sup> Significantly, these musicians represented both an older and a younger generation to Waters and his band: while Lockwood was an R&B session guitarist for Chess Records, and Thomas (in Barber’s words) a ‘marvellous, and as yet unrecorded’

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<sup>80</sup> Barber, *Jazz Me Blues*, p. 66.

<sup>81</sup> Barber, ‘What’s On in America’.

<sup>82</sup> Barber has recalled how Waters in fact spent relatively little time performing, instead leaving the majority of the set open for other well-known blues musicians to come and perform: ‘At Smitty’s [Corner] the band played about five sets of about 40 minutes, from about 10 to about 4. Muddy would come on for the last song of each set. He’d socialize with the audience [...] [and] the band would do all these songs, Otis [Spann] singing and [James] Cotton singing [...] And then for the last song, Muddy would get up and sing [...] [Then] there’d be a break for 20 minutes, then it’d start again.’ Barber, quoted in Gordon, *Can’t Be Satisfied*, 178.

<sup>83</sup> Chris Barber, ‘Blues Dying? Don’t You Believe It’, *Melody Maker*, 31 October 1959, p. 9; see also Barber, ‘What’s On in America’.



blues singer, Little Brother Montgomery had been a prolific ‘race’ recording artist during the 1930s—the same generation as Big Bill Broonzy.<sup>84</sup> For Barber, these experiences confirmed the continued vitality of blues performance:

If anyone ever again says the real blues are dead or dying, we can completely refute it as we have seen living proof to the contrary. And there are numerous young singers as natural at the blues as the older ones.<sup>85</sup>

Barber’s assertions added weight to the emerging consensus among British critics that the blues persisted as a vibrant, urban form, contrary to some critics’ earlier speculations about its demise. Yet these comments also vindicated the band’s dedication to New Orleans-style jazz and the blues. While critics like James Asman thought the success of white groups would have a deleterious effect on African American musical traditions, Barber could report that the blues was alive and well at home, too.

More importantly, the Barber band’s visits to Chicago provided further opportunities to pursue collaborations with African American musicians, and in particular Muddy Waters. On a number of occasions, members of Barber’s group, including Otilie Patterson, sat in with Waters and his band. Barber recalls the positive reception accorded Patterson by the audience at Smitty’s Corner during their first American tour:

Otilie started to sing Big Bill Broonzy’s tune ‘Southbound Train’. It was a song she’d sung with Big Bill himself not all that long before, and she launched into it [...] And the entire audience raised their right hands and said, ‘Yeah!’ That was really heart-warming because it showed that she had conveyed [...] what [the words] meant [...] That audience wasn’t joking in

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<sup>84</sup> Lightbody, ‘The Complete Story of the Second American Tour’.

<sup>85</sup> Barber, ‘Blues Dying? Don’t You Believe It’.

any way. If Muddy had sung the same song himself he would have got the same reaction.<sup>86</sup>

To Barber, then, Patterson's performance received as strong a reaction from the African American audience as Waters's. Patterson conceived of the experience in similar terms, recalling in 2008 a woman who took her aside after the performance to ask 'Lady, how come you sing like one of us?'.<sup>87</sup> Patterson's blues is therefore legitimised in both hers and Barber's accounts by her appearance within an 'authentic' African American space and validation by an 'authentic' audience.

The politics of these interactions are complex, and it is important to remain sceptical of Barber's and Patterson's accounts. There is no way now to recover their reception directly from Waters's audience members, and their own reports are likely to be both generous and somewhat self-serving, emphasising acceptance over any animosity they may have experienced. Indeed, Barber has since recalled witnessing a number of racist incidents during the band's visits, but these do not appear in his contemporary travelogues; the band's writings may therefore witness a deliberate strategy to remain positive.<sup>88</sup> Patterson's performances may be understood as an imagined racial passing: not only did she and Barber believe her performance indistinguishable from the 'real thing', but the band's presence within an African American performance context apparently went uncontested. While these recollections draw a noticeable parallel to Waters's own praise towards the Barber band during his 1958 tour – 'those cats wail like coloured people' – Barber and Patterson's perspective nevertheless appeals to a problematic fantasy of racial

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<sup>86</sup> Barber, *Jazz Me Blues*, p. 66.

<sup>87</sup> Mike Pinton, 'Spotlight on Otilie Patterson (Part 3)', *Just Jazz*, 201 (May 2008), 3-7, p. 5.

<sup>88</sup> One such incident was Barber witnessing the director of the New Orleans Jazz Club referring to Paul Barbarin's band as 'those n——'. See Barber, *Jazz Me Blues*, p. 78.

passing. Given the entrenched segregation of Chicago's neighbourhoods, as well as the broader power dynamics intrinsic to day-to-day encounters between whites and African Americans in the pre-Civil Rights era United States, the positive reception that Barber and Patterson perceived following their performances with Waters demonstrates their eagerness to be accepted in an African American cultural space but also raises the possibility that they may have unwittingly overlooked any social awkwardness that may have transpired. When we consider that the Barber band's ability to 'pass' relied to a great extent on their image as ambassadors of jazz who were facilitating its international mobility, the accuracy of their accounts becomes even more questionable; white musicians who visibly capitalise on 'borrowing' or emulating musical innovations originating in African American expressive culture often perceive these transactions in amicable terms, while African American musicians are often more attuned to their inequalities. Indeed, Waters clearly recognised the irony that he might have been criticised for 'copying' Elvis Presley if he had danced onstage in Britain, despite public knowledge of Presley's own considerable debt to blues idioms and performance techniques.<sup>89</sup>

Yet while it is right to be sceptical of Barber and Patterson's testimony, their accounts nonetheless suggest that both host and visitor found value in their interactions. Barber and Patterson's actions drew on an ideal of reciprocity, focused on their relationships with musicians whom they had hosted in Britain. Patterson's performance of 'Southbound Train' gained authority from the fact that she had recently performed it with its composer, Big Bill Broonzy. Similarly, Barber points

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<sup>89</sup> Robert H. Cataliotti, "'When Somebody Take Your Number and Use It': The 1960s, British Blues, and America's Racial Crossroads", in *Transatlantic Roots Music: Folk, Blues, and National Identities*, ed. by Jill Terry and Neil A. Wynn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 205-226 (pp. 211-212, 214-215, 222-223).

to Waters's eagerness to have the Barber band – whom he announced as his 'friends from the "State of England"' – sit in alongside the other guest musicians present.<sup>90</sup> Most interesting is the way that Patterson's performances engaged with reciprocity. The song 'Walkin' Thru The Park' (Sound Ex. 4.2), which was performed by Waters as a finale during his 1958 tour, concludes:

*Well it's goodbye Baby, I hope we meet again [x2]*

*I love you baby and I'll always be your friend.*<sup>91</sup>

In comparison, lyrics found in Otilie Patterson's 1959 scrapbook includes the following hastily drafted verses:

*It's goodbye Indiana, and Hello London Town [x2]*

*I got to [illegible]...I can hardly keep from crying.*

*Oh, I hate to leave you this way [x2]*

*But I promise all you people, I'll come right back some day.*<sup>92</sup>

These lyrics' location in Indiana suggests that they relate to Patterson's performance with Waters's band at the F&J Lounge in Gary, Indiana, and although it is not possible to confirm definitively what song Patterson wrote these lyrics for, they serve the same valedictory function as Waters's UK performance of 'Walkin' Thru The Park'. Both Patterson's and Waters's lyrics pay tribute to their international performance activities, the hospitality they experienced, and their desire to renew contact at a later date.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Barber, *Jazz Me Blues*, p. 67; Barber 'Blues Dying? Don't You Believe It'.

<sup>91</sup> Lyrics transcribed from 'Walkin' Thru The Park [reprise]', *Muddy Waters in Concert 1958* (Krazy Kat LP 7405, 1982).

<sup>92</sup> Otilie Patterson, '[unidentified lyrics]', NJA, Otilie Patterson Collection, Song Lyrics 1950s-1980s, Box 2, Item 1. These lyrics are written on the pages of Patterson's scrapbook, but are only partially legible because Patterson pasted a loose sheet of lyrics over the top.

<sup>93</sup> Patterson wrote in a 1959 autobiographical sketch of the 'exciting, stimulating experience of playing and singing to two hundred or so coloured people in a club in

Barber and Patterson's interactions with Chicago blues musicians also show how valuable African American musicians considered contact with overseas visitors. During their tours, Barber and Patterson became acquainted with the singer and songwriter James Oden, more commonly known as 'St. Louis' Jimmy, whom they met while he was lodging with Muddy Waters. Barber recalls socialising at length with Waters and Oden during a visit to Chicago, a moment captured in a photograph in Barber's collection (Fig. 4.2), and buying some 'rare King Oliver recordings' from Oden.<sup>94</sup> Otilie Patterson, too, acquired the lyrics to several of Oden's unpublished blues compositions. Two of these pieces, entitled 'She Was Mine First' and 'The Four Point Blues', survive in Oden's handwriting in the NJA's Otilie Patterson Collection (Fig. 4.3).<sup>95</sup>

Oden's ability as a songwriter was central to his musical identity. Beginning his career as a performer and recording artist during the 1930s, Oden had also

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Gary, Indiana, thanks to Muddy Waters, who toured with us in England.' See Patterson, *Diary/scrapbook 1960s* [c. 1956 onwards], NJA. This autobiographical sketch, appearing on a blank page of a scrapbook, appears to be an attempt at a diary or reflection on the year 1959 as a whole. A similar approach to Patterson's lyrics can be heard in Brownie McGhee's 1959 song 'Memories of My Trip', which pays tribute to members of the Barber band by name, thanking them for hosting his 1958 tour. See Brownie McGhee, 'Memories of My Trip', *Brownie McGhee Sings the Blues*, (Folkways Records FG 3557, 1959).

<sup>94</sup> Chris Barber with Bob Dawbarn, 'My American Journey', *Melody Maker*, 18 April 1959, p. 3; Barber, *Jazz Me Blues*, p. 67.

<sup>95</sup> NJA, Otilie Patterson Collection, Song Lyrics 1950s-1980s, Box 2, Item 1. Chris Barber, in a February 1960 'blindfold' interview for *Jazz Journal*, notes that Patterson had acquired from Oden a third song, entitled 'Ninety-nine Out of A Hundred They Have Some Love Disease'. No further documentation of this song survives, however. See Chris Barber, 'In My Opinion', *Jazz Journal*, 13.2 (February 1960), 5-7, p. 6. The Barber band recorded 'The Four Point Blues' on the 1960 album *Chris Barber's Blues Book Vol. 1*; 'She Was Mine First', in contrast, is an otherwise unknown composition by James Oden, and remains both unpublished and unrecorded to this day. See Lawrence Davies, "'She Was Mine First / She Still Belongs To Me": A Previously Unknown Blues Composition by the Chicago Blues Singer St. Louis Jimmy Oden', *All Thirteen Keys*, 19 June 2017 <<https://allthirteenkeys.files.wordpress.com/2017/06/davies-oden-report.pdf>> [accessed 19 December 2017].

composed the blues standards ‘Night Time is the Right Time’, ‘Goin’ Down Slow’, and ‘Sitting Down Thinking Blues’. After World War Two, he became active in the production and promotion elements of the Chicago blues scene as co-owner and producer for the Opera and J.O.B. labels. Although a car accident in 1957 curtailed his performance career, Oden continued to write songs for other leading Chicago blues musicians.<sup>96</sup> In a 1960 interview with blues researcher Paul Oliver, Oden discussed his songwriting activities:

I used to play piano myself a little bit but I never did play piano on record [...] See there were so many [pianists] that were really good [...] But I used to write blues for some of them. Of course all blues singers make up their own blues you know, but I used to give them blues too [...] I got inspiration from writin’, and I looked at other people’s troubles and I writes from that, and I writes from my own troubles [...] See I was an orphan when I was eleven year old [...] I never sung no one’s number but my own and I been writin’ songs for the last thirty years.<sup>97</sup>

Thus Oden distinguishes the performer’s role from that of songwriter, and perceives his own talents as leaning towards the latter. Specifically, he conceives of writing lyrics for others as an act of ‘giving’; though writing from his own experiences and observations, Oden gave his songs to performers who would then become associated with them. Oliver’s interview with Oden’s longtime collaborator, pianist Roosevelt Sykes, corroborates this:

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<sup>96</sup> Bob Hall, ‘Oden, “St. Louis” Jimmy’, in *Encyclopedia of the Blues*, ed. by Edward Komara, 2 vols. (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 732-733. Oden would also occasionally sit in at other musicians’ gigs. See Jacques Demêtre and Marcel Chauvard, *Voyage au Pays du Blues* (Levallois-Perret: Editions CLARB, 1994), pp. 126-128.

<sup>97</sup> Paul Oliver, *Conversation with the Blues*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 107.

Now this tune ['Night Time is the Right Time'] [...] St Louis Jimmy [Oden] wrote that. But he didn't give it to me, he gave it to my brother. My brother wasn't a recordin' man, but Jimmy thought he wanted to record some tunes so he gave him this. And I asked my brother to give it to me.'<sup>98</sup>

Oden's process of writing and 'giving' songs suggests that he saw Barber and Patterson's visit as a further opportunity to cultivate his role as songwriter, this time with international musicians. Perhaps Oden gave his songs to Patterson on the expectation that she, as Britain's leading blues singer, would perform and record them back in the UK. Oden's conceptualising of writing songs for others as a 'gift' effectively circumvents the prevailing economics of white musicians' debt to African American musical culture, which was intrinsically skewed against African American originators. By 'giving' songs to Patterson to perform, he further cultivated the reciprocity between the Barber band and their network of African American musical acquaintances.

Barber and Patterson's interactions with African American blues musicians trouble the prevailing narratives regarding the discovery and performance of urban blues by white male enthusiasts. Scholars and writers have focused on encounters with recordings, aspiring musicians transfixed by the sounds they hear. Andrew Kellett, for instance, has written of British enthusiasts' knowledge of the blues being 'pieced together from three key types of media...[:] record albums, radio broadcasts, and published material' with only 'sporadic' exposure to live performance, which did not alter enthusiasts' perceptions until later, into the 1960s.<sup>99</sup> In turn, face-to-face encounters have been played down, as opportunities for misunderstanding or even

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<sup>98</sup> Oliver, *Conversation With the Blues*, p. 108.

<sup>99</sup> Andrew Kellett, 'Born in Chicago: The Impact of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band on the British Blues "Network," 1964-1970', in *Transatlantic Roots Music*, pp. 179-204 (pp. 182-183).

experiences to be avoided. Waters's biographer Robert Gordon, for instance, retells an anecdote of how the musician 'hid in the bathroom' when members of the (white American) Paul Butterfield blues band attended a performance at Smitty's Corner in the early 1960s, believing them to be from the IRS.<sup>100</sup> This story does not sit comfortably with Barber's contemporary and more recent accounts of visits to Waters's performances, where the band leader was well versed in playing host to guests whether they were longstanding friends or more recent professional acquaintances.<sup>101</sup>

In turn, Barber and Patterson's interactions with Waters and his associates provide a more nuanced narrative of musical reception and adoption than has often been allowed. Their connection does not emulate the 'swaggering enactment of black masculinity' that Brian Ward identifies in later British blues musicians' performances.<sup>102</sup> While both Barber and Patterson were seduced by the glimmer of racial passing in their performances in South Side clubs, these performances may also be understood as part of a reciprocal process between British and African American musicians, as I argued above. On both sides of the Atlantic, Waters, Barber, and Patterson pursued collaborative elements in their performances. The Barber band's inclusion of urban blues songs in their repertoire after 1958 grew

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<sup>100</sup> Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied*, pp. 155-156.

<sup>101</sup> Visiting only a week or so later, the French blues researchers Jacques Demêtre and Marcel Chauvard received a similarly positive welcome; Waters greeted them on their arrival outside Smitty's Corner, before introducing them to other musicians present in the audience. See Demêtre and Chauvard, *Voyage au Pays du Blues*, pp. 126-128. Waters's regular 1950s drummer, Francis Clay, asserted that he had taught his boss 'how to talk to white people'. While it is hard to gauge the veracity of this assertion, it demonstrates – unsurprisingly – that knowing how to interact with white people was a pressing concern for African American musicians living in a segregated society. See Tooze, *Muddy Waters: The Mojo Man*, p. 153.

<sup>102</sup> Brian Ward, 'That White Man, Burdon: The Animals, Race, and the American South in the British Blues Boom', in *Transatlantic Roots Music*, pp. 153-178 (p. 154).



primarily from their contact with African American musicians, both in the UK and during their subsequent US tours. For Patterson, discovery of African American music on record was supplemented not just by live experiences but also by the gift of lyrics from St. Louis Jimmy Oden. Barber and Patterson's interactions with Muddy Waters and his associates during their American tours may therefore lend themselves to an alternative framework of encounter, encapsulated in Jeff Todd Titon's thoughts on fieldwork as 'visiting', an activity that:

puts us into reciprocal relations with our hosts in the musical culture we are learning about [...] initially a visit among strangers may not get far into the deep exchanges one wants, but such a visit is certainly a good start [...]

There are visits among strangers, but there are also visits among neighbors and friends. Strangers become neighbors and friends.<sup>103</sup>

In Titon's mind, encounters are dynamic activities in which the relationship between the observer and the observed, or between a visiting musician and their host, is not fixed but fluid and continually renegotiated.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have sought to move beyond the formulation of encounters between British blues enthusiasts and their African American idols as moments when pre-existing ideas could be tested and verified, moments 'when British blues critics [and musicians] could compare the "real" thing to the records they had been listening to

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<sup>103</sup> Jeff Todd Titon, 'Fieldwork as Visiting at Home: Distance and Nostalgia', keynote address, British Forum for Ethnomusicology, University of Aberdeen, April 2004, p. 3, <[https://www.academia.edu/18887082/Fieldwork\\_at\\_Home\\_as\\_Visiting\\_Distance\\_and\\_Nostalgia\\_2004\\_BFE\\_Conference\\_Keynote\\_](https://www.academia.edu/18887082/Fieldwork_at_Home_as_Visiting_Distance_and_Nostalgia_2004_BFE_Conference_Keynote_)> [accessed 18 December 2017]. My emphasis.

for years.’<sup>104</sup> This conception is tacitly informed by the prevailing notion of blues appreciation in international contexts, grounded in experience of recordings, where African American expressive culture was reframed by perceptions of its participants’ difference and its separation from mainstream, white culture.<sup>105</sup>

Historical accounts of Waters’s 1958 tour have overemphasised debates around the authenticity of his style. Although some listeners were averse to the elements of his performances considered modern or commercial, the majority of enthusiasts and critics heard Waters’s music as a contemporary extension of ‘authentic’ folk practice, brought about by the changing social experiences of African American communities yet still grounded in the musical past. Yet the inspiration that both musicians and researchers drew from first-hand contact with blues performers put the two fledgling groups on a collision course. British musicians garnered popularity with their interpretations of jazz and blues modelled on those they had heard live. In turn, collectors, critics, and researchers increasingly perceived the neophytes’ success as a threat to black ‘folk’ culture. Commercial renditions by white musicians would, critics argued, divert attention and support away from the ‘real thing’. In essence, these two factions channelled their passion in different ways: one group sought to preserve the blues according to its unique cultural role, while the other sought to emulate it as an expression of their own sincerity.

But we can also think about encounters as flexible, developing interactions. Although blues musicians’ perceived authenticity relied on ideals of ‘unmediated’

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<sup>104</sup> O’Connell, *Blues, How Do You Do?*, p. 41; see also Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, p. 40.

<sup>105</sup> O’Connell has explored how Paul Oliver’s emphasis on the black ‘folk’ culture at the root of the blues stemmed in part from positioning himself at a geographical and social remove from his subject. See O’Connell, *Blues, How Do You Do?*, p. 41.

performance, their concerts in Britain depended upon collaboration with British musicians. While listeners' reactions to Waters as (in)authentic stem from concerns about the health of African American folk culture in the face of commercialism and technology, they nevertheless demonstrate a concern with the politics of contact and collaboration. Waters's concerts, both in Leeds and on tour with the Barber band, were prompted by an incipient economy of musical exchange between the United States and Britain, as well as by a desire to learn from and collaborate with visiting African American musicians. In turn, the Barber band's American tours were acutely invested in both the exchange economy of international touring, and the cultivation of enduring, reciprocal relationships with African American musicians.

This alternative formulation should not, of course, blind us to the more inequitable aspects of blues's international spread. While musicians on both sides of the Atlantic believed in the music's wide appeal, the benefits experienced from this mobility were unevenly distributed. The Barber band had greater control over perceptions of their approach than did musicians like Muddy Waters during his British tours. The examples I have explored in this chapter may be thought-provoking inversions, or at least complications, of the relationship between white British and African American musicians, but they were only fleeting moments amid the structural inequalities of interracial musical contact at midcentury.

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**PHOTOS BY JOHNSON IMPERIAL STUDIO**  
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Fig 4.2: Muddy Waters, James Oden, Chris Barber, and Otilie Patterson, McKie's Disc Jockey Show Lounge, Chicago, 1959. Chris Barber Collection, reproduced with kind permission of Equinox Publishing.

*Image removed due to copyright restrictions*

Fig. 4.3a: James Oden, 'The Four Point Blues', NJA, Otilie Patterson Collection, Song Lyrics 1950s-1980s, Box 2, Item 1.

*Image removed due to copyright restrictions*

Fig 4.3b: James Oden, 'She Was Mine First / She Still Belongs To Me', NJA, Otilie Patterson Collection, Song Lyrics 1950s-1980s, Box 2, Item 1.

## Conclusion

In his 1959 study *The Jazz Scene*, Eric Hobsbawm (as Francis Newton) identified a ‘secondary public’ for jazz: an audience a world away from the music’s original consumers, producers, and performance contexts. While the ‘jazz public’ conjured images of a New Orleans street parade, a Southern juke joint, a Harlem ‘rent party’, or a ‘honky-tonk’ saloon bar, Hobsbawm argued, jazz’s ‘secondary’ public was more likely to be found in a record shop, at home by the gramophone, or dancing to a live band in a suburban community hall. This contrast, not to mention that jazz’s secondary audience was ‘far vaster than its primary one’, gave the historian pause:

The first and original public for jazz [...] is interesting; but it is much less odd, and for that reason much less puzzling, than the relationship of the outsiders who do not belong there but have taken [jazz] to their hearts.<sup>1</sup>

Hobsbawm’s remarks are perceptive; they capture the enduring phenomenon of blues and jazz’s international circulation and wonder how these musics are understood and repurposed – both in print and in performance – as a result of their relocation. In this thesis, I have argued that British interest in the blues, while often associated with the 1960s ‘blues boom’, predated this movement by three decades. Recordings were available on domestic record labels from the early 1930s, and performers were soon emulating what they heard. More importantly, blues appreciation and performance thrived as part of a broader interest in jazz. Although

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Hobsbawm [as Francis Newton], *The Jazz Scene* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1959), pp. 228-229. Although Hobsbawm does not explicitly define the imagery of jazz’s ‘secondary public’ here, the photo insert earlier in the book indicates what he had in mind: Hobsbawm juxtaposes images of African American jazz performance contexts (including Harlem’s Savoy Ballroom, a recording session, and a New Orleans street parade) with British appreciation contexts (a record shop, a ‘Riverboat Shuffle’, and teenagers dancing at a London jazz cellar).

these two genres are routinely separated today, they were inextricably linked during the period under investigation. Genre-bound histories considering either ‘blues’ or ‘jazz’ inevitably push overlaps in appreciation and performance to the periphery.<sup>2</sup> By searching for what distinguishes British blues appreciation, for instance, writers overlook related activities that may support, modulate, or sometimes contradict their observations. Ideas, appreciation events, and performance contexts overlapped constantly at this time, demonstrating the futility of trying to understand British ‘blues’ appreciation without also considering British engagement with ‘jazz’.

My research demonstrates that international circulation was inherent to the development of blues and jazz. British interest in these genres was coterminous not only with jazz appreciation cultures in Europe and beyond, but also with the music’s development and circulation within the United States. British ‘hot rhythm’ collectors of the 1930s became interested in the ‘hot’ jazz and ‘classic’ blues that had been recently recorded in the United States; in the 1940s the ideas, texts, and sounds of the New Orleans revival were taken up by British critics and performers. Parallels continued after the Second World War: British audiences’ emerging understanding of the blues as a rural ‘folk’ tradition that expressed the history of African Americans’ marginalisation and oppression were informed by the circulation of American folklore scholarship and, on a less consistent basis, by the politically engaged Cultural Front performance culture. By the late 1950s, too, notions of authenticity derived from critical engagement with recordings were challenged by evidence of African American musicians’ commercial and professional success, the

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<sup>2</sup> Here I am mindful of jazz scholar Catherine Tackley’s research on the early history of jazz in Britain by adopting ‘an approach in which the scope of consideration is widened, rather than focused by means of imposing a spurious definition’. See Catherine Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain, 1880-1935* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. ix.



growing influence of the urban experience on black music manifesting in urban blues and rhythm and blues, as well as the politics of interracial contact and collaboration entailed by the international success of rock 'n' roll and the relaxation of restrictions on American musicians' touring. This synchronicity is important: while my research attends to the ways in which local circumstances affected the reception, performance, and meanings of blues and jazz in Britain, time and again the evidence shows that these musics' international circulation was not only wide but also *expected* by its producers and consumers. It is curious that this idea is not more widely accepted given that, as I note in my introduction, even writers who lionise blues and jazz as uniquely American bolster their claims with these genres' successful international adoption and assimilation.

My research has important methodological implications. While histories of popular music often work at the level of broad cultural phenomena – the New Orleans revival, the British blues boom – this thesis shows how such movements originate in networks of specific performers, critics, and enthusiasts, and in the circulation of specific sounds and texts. Tracing these networks provides a vivid picture of early blues and jazz appreciation, one that is often lost in accounts of the same movements at 'critical mass'. As I have explored in chapters 2 and 3, for instance, the revivalist tenets of jazz and blues reception may better be understood through the backgrounds, motivations, and interactions of individuals like Charles Edward Smith, Alan Lomax, Rudi Blesh, Max Jones, Derrick Stewart-Baxter, and James Asman, than as an ideology with defined and constant precepts. Likewise, as I have shown in my final chapter, understandings of what constituted 'authentic' performance in 1950s British blues and jazz culture may be better understood

through musicians' transatlantic movements and interactions rather than through critical assessments of their fidelity to a historic performance tradition.

My research has involved piecing together a picture of the British blues and jazz scene from brief textual sources. While it is possible to learn a great deal from a chapter, interview, or article, far less can be gleaned from a discographical listing or a Rhythm Club notice in the press. Only by examining a great number of these side by side does their value become transparent; inert snippets reveal a thriving culture of playing and listening built on the ubiquity of recorded jazz and the popularity of amateur performance and criticism. Necessarily, this thesis only scratches the surface of the Rhythm Club movement, amateur band contests, and the second-hand record and book trade, as subjects in their own right. I hope that my preliminary investigations of the many available sources has demonstrated their complexity and, more importantly, their potential as subjects for future research.

Interest in blues and jazz between 1929 and 1960 transformed attitudes towards the history, meaning, and value of African American music in Britain. While earlier audiences had treated the music as primitive 'noise' or as a passing novelty, an emerging critical vocabulary around 'hot rhythm' placed African Americans' skills as performers and their ability to craft enduring art at its centre. Through record series and Rhythm Clubs, jazz accrued many of the connotations of cultural importance that persist today, displacing more restrictive hierarchies of 'high' and 'low' music. Listeners' tendency towards advocacy assume their full force in New Orleans revivalism of the 1940s: by framing jazz and blues as 'people's music', British enthusiasts launched an assault on traditional values by linking the music's vitality and significance to its ability to inscribe and respond to social marginalisation and racial oppression. This 'sociological' view of African

American music has become fundamental to subsequent understandings of jazz and blues, affording these genres strong political resonance.

Despite the progressive – even subversive – force of British blues and jazz interest, scholars have chosen to focus on a different narrative when examining the growing white audience for genres of African American origin: writers like Jeff Todd Titon, Marybeth Hamilton, and Elijah Wald highlight how white enthusiasts’ focus on the subaltern origins of jazz and blues helped them to construct a romanticised view of these traditions that was dismissive of musicians’ professionalisation and commercial success, locating ‘authenticity’ instead in their innate capacity to express themselves through music. Likewise, Christian O’Connell and Hilary Moore emphasise how the cultural and geographical distance of British enthusiasts from the music, as well as their apparent reliance on recordings as mediators, facilitated their ‘invention’ of the blues according to racialised notions of the alterity of African American culture and society.<sup>3</sup> Yet identifying British enthusiasts’ propensity to depict blues and jazz musicians as ‘other’ does little to understand them; to do so typically invokes an image of pioneering yet misguided enthusiasts whose ideas have since been superseded by more nuanced positions. Such a critique is not only anachronistic, but it also rests on the assumption that modern-day approaches are no longer in thrall to racialised thinking. By paying closer attention to historical figures’ priorities and intentions, then, we can better understand both the motivations and the historical value of their ideas and activities.

Enthusiasts’ recognition of blues and jazz’s continued relevance to the African American experience did not preclude these musics’ assimilation outside of that context. Revivalists’ fixation with New Orleans jazz, for instance, derived to a

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<sup>3</sup> I have discussed these debates and their occurrence in existing literature in the introduction to this thesis.

great extent from what John Gennari has termed jazz's 'interracial, transcultural, class-defying nature'.<sup>4</sup> Such an understanding was duly embraced in a wartime context. As Rex Harris and Max Jones wrote in the VE Day edition of the *Melody Maker*:

Jazz seems such a petty, inconsiderable trifle at a moment like this. [...] But nevertheless there are thousands to whom it stands as a symbol of the life they knew before they were plunged into the nightmare of these last few years. [...] This jazz of ours seems to have been a touchstone of sanity at a time when the very props of civilisation were cracking [...] its very spontaneity, its acceptance by the many races of the world show it to have been a factor of international goodwill which transcended the boundaries of language and ideologies.<sup>5</sup>

Harris and Jones's reflection on the value of jazz in wartime demonstrates the limits of viewing British jazz and blues fans as isolated, at a time when their very survival depended upon a broader, internationalist outlook. Such an approach can be detected in attitudes towards visiting musicians, too, as I have discussed in chapter 3. While performers were appraised for their embodiment of African American 'folk' traditions in keeping with the 'folkloric paradigm' identified by Karl Hagstrom Miller, the strength of association that jazz and blues had with their communities of origin is arguably what made them ideal candidates for repurposing. Paige McGinley's concept of 'antitheatrical theatricalism' is useful here: blues and jazz's perceived ability to inscribe the political, social, and personal antagonisms of their performers made these traditions highly amenable to adoption across boundaries of

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<sup>4</sup> John Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and its Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 130.

<sup>5</sup> Rex Harris and Max Jones, 'V-E Collectors' Corner', *Melody Maker*, 12 May 1945, p. 5.

race and nation. In the cases of Josh White and Big Bill Broonzy, their performance demeanours built on notions of intimacy and affinity that bridged social and political divisions. For Muddy Waters and other visitors touring Britain via the ‘exchange’ system in the later 1950s, at stake was less their adherence to blues or jazz archetypes than their facilitation of Anglo-American musical collaboration. Such partnerships run counter to received ideas about revivalists’ desires to preserve and contain black music in the name of ‘folk’ authenticity and, as I have noted in chapter 4, introduce the opinions and motivations of African American musicians themselves that are often absent in discussions of white blues and jazz interest.

Ultimately, British encounters with blues and jazz in transatlantic circulation demonstrate early moments in these musics’ ongoing appeal. The events, activities, performances, and ideas that I have considered in this thesis signal British performers’ and listeners’ conflicted desire to understand, promote, and assimilate the music, but sometimes also contain and misappropriate it. British enthusiasts’ embrace of blues and jazz thus stands as an important chapter in the wider recognition of African American music’s enduring cultural, social, and political power.

## List of Sound Examples

All sound examples can be found online at the following website:

<http://allthirteenkeys.wordpress.com/thesis-sound-examples>

This page is password protected. The password is: kclrhythmclub2018

### Introduction

Ex. i: Otilie Patterson, 'St. Louis Blues', rec. 5 January 1955, Royal Festival Hall, London.

Chris Barber's Jazz Band, with Otilie Patterson, *Chris Barber at the Royal Festival Hall*. (Decca DFE 6252, 1955).

### Chapter 2

Ex. 2.1: George Webb's Dixielanders, 'When The Saints Go Marching In', rec. c. 1944, BBC Overseas Recorded Broadcasting Service.

George Webb's Dixielanders, *George Webb's Dixielanders* (Jazzology J-122, 1985)

Ex. 2.2: Vic Lewis and Jack Parnell's Jazzmen, 'Mean Old Bed Bug Blues', rec. 12 February 1944.

Vic Lewis and Jack Parnell's Jazzmen, *Singin' the Blues 1944-45* (Upbeat URCD163, 2012)

Ex. 2.3: Vic Lewis and Jack Parnell's Jazzmen, 'Is You Is, Or Is You Ain't My Baby?', rec. 24 October 1944.

Vic Lewis and Jack Parnell's Jazzmen, *Singin' the Blues 1944-45* (Upbeat URCD163, 2012)

### Chapter 3

Ex. 3.1: Josh White, 'The House I Live In', rec. 6 October 1944

Josh White, *Josh White Sings Easy* (Asch 348, 1944)

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Big Bill Broonzy, *On Tour in Britain, 1952* (JASMCD 3011-2, 2002)

## Chapter 4

Ex. 4.1: Muddy Waters, 'Can't Be Satisfied', rec. 25/26 October 1959, Free Trade Hall, Manchester

Ex. 4.2: Muddy Waters, 'Walkin' Thru The Park (Reprise)', rec. 25/26 October 1959, Free Trade Hall, Manchester

Muddy Waters [with Chris Barber's Jazz Band], *Muddy Waters in Concert 1958* (Krazy Kat LP 7405, 1982)

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